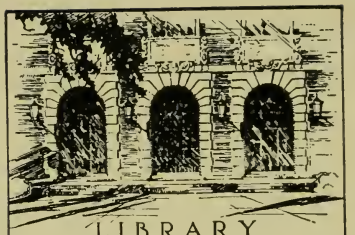
A Wilful Young Woman

By the Author of

"A Rustic Maid"



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A WILFUL YOUNG WOMAN.

VOL. III.

A WILFUL YOUNG WOMAN

BY

A. PRICE

AUTHOR OF

"A RUSTIC MAID," "WHO IS SYLVIA?"

ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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A WILFUL YOUNG WOMAN.

CHAPTER I.

A HAPPY NEW YEAR TO YOU.

It was the last day of the year.

Miss Hurst, with much importance, brought to the morning sitting-room twelve months' accumulation of bills and letters, the former all paid, the latter all answered, yet, she conceived, requiring to be 'run through' before fileing or destroying. And this sacrifice to the manes of the fleeting months involved such examining, explaining, that all other

occupations had to be set aside to assist at it.

Sydney's share in the work was simple, consisting of tearing innumerable epistles into diminutive bits, out of which Miss Hurst made queer little pillows and presented them to the poor: Mr. Hurst's was equally easy to him, the addition mentally of items of domestic outlay, by which Miss Hurst could satisfy herself that neither she nor her tradesmen had been egregiously cheating one another. But the worst of the labour lay below the surface, certainly to one, perhaps to two concerned. For it appeared that never a trifle had been purchased for the house, done in, or wanted by it, that had not somehow been necessitated by 'Gilbert.' 'Dear Gilbert,' as this best of managers never failed to dub him, had in some mysterious way compelled the roof repair-

ing, rooms repainting, a score of fads supplying—though his tastes were simple as a hermit's!—and had, by wants or wishes, drained the slender family purse of its last pound. 'Though,' cried Jean Hurst—a sincere believer in her own ingenuous self-deception—'I don't mind that the least! Some call it drudgery for me to have to manage like this; Mrs. Greaves often says it is—you know whom I mean, Gilbert. Miss Grey is tearing up one of her letters now; but I always answer "No." I care for nothing while I see you comfortable, Gilbert dear!'

With which triumphant speech this epitome of skill and devotion gathered up her account-books, swept and garnished for another year's campaign, and bestowed a caress of mild patronage on her brother's thick brown hair, that was showing lines of white long before its legitimate time.

For an instant a sting, all but unbearable, confessed itself in the quick, fierce contraction of brows and mouth. Sydney knew that look must come; watched covertly, caught it, brief though it was. Another moment it was quenched in the nobler peace his face habitually wore. Her own eyes sank, filling with tears.

'Take the morning while it is fine, and have your walk now, Miss Grey,' counselled Miss Hurst; and having asked, somewhat wistfully, 'Can I do nothing for you, Mr. Hurst?' and been answered, 'Nothing whatever, I thank you,' she hurried out into the fresh, keen air, there haply to get rid of the pent-up irritability engendered by the last two hours.

What peculiar set of nerves had started quivering she could not tell. Nor could she define precisely why Miss Jean's maladroit tenderness provoked her oftener

and oftener to the verge of expostulation. Driven up a corner, she might have averred it was bare instinct prompting protection of one who, with rare self-restraint, forbore all self-defence. But up this inquisitorial corner she was not to be hedged till all ways but one were closed. Meanwhile, she sped along the breezy upper road, the river always in sight—that river which once Mr. Hurst had called, in half-jesting earnest, his very good friend, for 'he could trust it with his cares, it listened, sang to him, soothed him, went by and told no one!'—permitting herself no speculation on the future beyond an unanswerable, 'Shall I be here when next year ends, as now?'

An undreamt-of factor in the solution of this question met the girl, as, with well-poised figure, she stepped lightly along the frost-bound path. A pair of elderly eyes

observed her with interest from a well-built brougham, till the vehicle took a turn, and coming to the porch at Wynstone, deposited its occupant on an untimely call.

It was Mrs. Preece, wife of Capel Moor's non-resident rector, whose modern gothic dwelling peeped at his second, seldom visited parish, from among the trees on the opposite side of the water. One mile and a half lay between the ecclesiastical edifices over which the Reverend Everard Preece presided, but communication between the villages could only be held by crossing the stream, or by a five mile détour over the nearest bridge, and this may account for the fact that the Preeces' poorer flock at Capel Moor had to shift spiritually very much for themselves, comforting their sick or shriving their dying according to their own rustic lights; taking their Sabbath

services at one hour or another, or not at all, as the state of the river, or road, or rectory horses decided. It was a condition of affairs that enemies of episcopacy averred would never have been allowed if Capel Moor had not been a good living, held by a rich man. Had poverty entered the situation, 'then,' said these prejudiced folks, 'the rector would soon have felt the pastoral crook about his shoulders!' And, quite lately, a vindictive local paper had stirred up such a hubbub on the matter, that the outcome was an alteration, which the rector's wife came herself to announce.

Ushered straight into the study, Gilbert Hurst was unable to elude this guest, whose heavy conversational touch experience had taught him to dread; so, with his annoyed sister, he rose to receive her.

'The same as ever?' questioned Mrs. Preece, in rasping tones of condolence,

ignoring Mr. Hurst's bow, and diving after his hand, which she persisted in holding in her own bemittened clasp while she spoke. 'No better? No likelihood of restoration of that precious power? None! Oh, how I feel for you! Do let me give you a chair. *I* can find one for myself. We, who are not afflicted, ought to wait on those who are! But never do I see you, Mr. Hurst, without saying afterwards to my husband, "Affliction has fallen on rich ground, rich, Everard; Mr. Hurst knows it is well ordained. He carries himself as an Englishman, a gentleman, a Christian!'

Having delivered which speech, at once patriotic, polite, and pious, Mrs. Preece relinquished the unresponsive palm, seated her fur-encased figure by Miss Hurst (she provokingly conscious of her oldest shabbiest homespun!) apologised for the unseasonable visit with the simple explana-

tion that the hour suited *her* better than a later one, and then entered on their parochial quandary.

'It seems Capel Moor is considered benighted! Why, I cannot really see. We keep a schoolmistress here. We give the choir a treat. We offer a guinea to anyone who will take the duty if the water is out, or Mr. Preece or the horses ill, so what more can be expected reasonably? Nothing! But people are not reasonable, so I have urged my husband to yield to the times, and keep a curate. A man, as I say, to look after our sheep on Capel Moor. He will cost us a hundred and fifty a year, so the sheep ought to be grateful.'

Here was news. Five small farmhouses, and an occasional tenant of a fishing-box on the river-side, formed the present aristocracy of the village. A resident clergyman would be an exciting

addition. To do Miss Hurst justice, her first thought was it might be some one Gilbert would take to.

'Have you chosen a curate?' she asked, and on hearing 'yes,' and that he would be there in a fortnight, inquired his name, and where he would take up his abode.

'At the Manor. You know the house is too large for the people who rent it. They will be glad to let half, and attend to Mr.—Mr.—I forget his name, and his young family,' answered Mrs. Preece.

'Then the gentleman is married?'

'A widower, just home from abroad. He's been a missionary, and, according to testimonials, is an excellent man. Of course, we chose a good one. But we have had a great deal to think of in getting him. The applications we have had, and the letters I have written! More than

once I have said to Mr. Preece, "Oh, how I wish poor Mr. Hurst, over there, had taken orders before this sad incapacity came on him——"'

'My brother, Mrs. Preece, never intended to take orders.'

'Ah, but if he had! Then he could have been the curate, with a little coaching over the prayers and extempore sermons, and it need not have cost us so much—we may have to put down a horse, as it is!—and the stipend might have been a help——'

Miss Hurst bridled at this.

'A help, Mrs. Preece, we are quite able to do without. There is no need for my brother to exert himself. *I* see that he wants for nothing.'

'Undoubtedly.'

Mrs. Preece wanted these Hursts' friendliness for the curate, or the man

would leave out of sheer dulness, so she tacked neatly off the shoal :—

'I should have said it would offer occupation, amusement, for Mr. Hurst. That was what I meant. Though,' glad to turn the subject, 'that exceedingly ladylike girl who lives with you must be a great assistance in passing time. She looks quite intellectual.'

'Oh, yes: Miss Grey is a very acceptable person,' admitted Miss Hurst, awkwardly. 'Gilbert, was there not a book we promised Mrs. Preece the last time she was here? The day Miss Grey was gone out, you know. We seem to have forgotten it. Can you remember what it was, Mrs. Preece?'

'Not the least, and it's of no consequence,' returned the rector's wife, not easy to divert from any point on which she felt curiosity. 'I recollect Miss Grey *was*

out in September when I came, and I was sorry for it. My husband noticed her in church and called her beautiful. And a cousin of mine who came over to service was loud in his admiration. I met the young lady just now, and I'm bound to say I think the gentlemen are right. Ah, Mr. Hurst, how I wish you could confirm their opinion!'

He only answered with a forced smile, but Miss Jean, who with meaning glances had vainly essayed to stop Mrs. Preece, now cut across the topic with the remark that Miss Grey was sensible and understood her position, and that was enough for them. Appearances were of no consequence whatever.

'But it is nicer,' persisted Mrs. Preece, 'to feel you have pleasing-looking people about you. Don't you agree with me, Mr. Hurst?' He did, as tersely as possi-

ble. 'And, though I only saw her a minute, I thought my cousin's observation correct. He goes in for beauty, and said the curve of Miss Grey's lips was simply perfect.

'Oh, really,' cried Miss Hurst, exasperated at this marplot's enlargement on an ever avoided theme, 'my brother and I have other things to think of besides Miss Grey's or Miss anybody's lips! My housekeeping and his books do not leave us time for such frivolous subjects, I assure you, Mrs. Preece!' and by the silence of one auditor, the annoyance visible in the other, Mrs. Preece did at last comprehend that the conversation she had hit on was not congenial. Therefore she began to fear the horse would catch cold if it stood any longer; hoped with spring Mr. Hurst would come over and dine with them, an invitation always vaguely repeated, never definitely accept-

ed. And commending the new curate to their courtesy with the impromptu message that Mr. Preece 'sent his compliments and looked to them to make the stranger at home there,' at last got up to end her quarterly call.

Mr. Hurst opened the door; his sister, ringing a servant forward, would only have gone the regulation half-a-dozen paces with the visitor she was glad to be quit of, but as her brother, returning to fireside, fell into a fit of musing, Mrs. Preece exclaimed from the hall: 'Oh, Miss Hurst, a moment, please,' and the lady so summoned approaching, 'now I remember the curate's name. You ought to know it, for fear Mr. Gilbert kindly calls first. "Babbington." That is it. "Horatius Babbington." He's been among the Jews, some nasty, dirty place, I daresay, and got out of health, but this

quiet parish will soon set him up. I hope you'll take to each other. "Babbington." Don't forget. Good-day.'

The rich rector's lady wrapped her bear-skins round her in her brougham; the well-to-do equipage was coached dexterously off the small grounds without carrying off either gate-post; housemaid Fanny watched it roll away without incurring reproof for ill-manners, and still Miss Hurst stood transfixed where Mrs. Preece's last words had fallen on her ears.

'Fanny,' she said presently, 'go and shut the study door;' and when the girl had vanished she seated herself at the foot of the stairs, took some long breaths, and put her hands over her face.

'Horatius back—and coming here!' she whispered, gasping interjectionally; 'and that woman—hopes we shall—take to one another! And I'm so altered! I wonder

if he is. Oh, dear, dear me. Dear me! What a queer world it is!'

She was still sitting there, rocking herself to and fro, looking very odd, when Sydney returned brighter of spirit for her half-hour in the brilliant air, penitent moreover for her secret intolerance of poor Miss Jean's shortcomings. The sight of her form, agitated and in such unusual position, brought Sydney quickly to her, asking, 'What is it? Are you ill?' Or—indefinite fright seizing her—'Nothing has happened?'

'Oh, no!' Miss Jean answered, re-assuring if perplexing. 'Nothing of any'—choking over the assertion—'consequence to anyone; unless me; and that doesn't signify. I was only—thinking—of a—long time ago. People do. Silly people. Like me! They—can't—help it!'

And with actual tears meandering down

her nose, Miss Hurst picked herself up and went into the seclusion of her own room, whence she emerged only to behave the rest of the day with hysterical vivacity, which contrasted so strongly with her brother's extreme taciturnity, that Sydney could not help suspecting her forenoon's absence had in some way unusually tried them both.

At night this surmise was confirmed with an addenda that drew herself into the thick of Wynstone's entanglements. She had bidden them good-night, had seen Mr. Hurst left (cruelly, as absurdly enough it always seemed to her) in the fading fire-light below, and now sat by her dressing-table, affected, spite of herself, by the mingled excitement and depression that seemed in the very air that day.

New Year's Eve. The old year dying, nearly gone. The phantoms of its many

hours floating before her as such visions will when anniversaries proclaim the junction of our two eternities; all that the months had stolen looming out of the mists of one; Mary, with her true sweet face and heart as sweet and true; Rupert—she smarted with self-contempt, thinking of him; that episode was growing horrible to her womanly conscience; her mother away and angered still: the vigil was indeed nigh bringing the girl's soul, in her solitariness, very low, till a calm, worn face seemed to gaze tenderly upon her once again. 'My child will make it all right; God bless her,' came like an echo to her, and in that blessing she was once more strong.

She had need to be so.

A subdued tap at the door was followed by Miss Hurst's entrance, in a wonderful dressing-gown, and in a mood that could

brook no rest till it had spent itself in confidence.

'I saw your light, I thought if you didn't mind I would come and sit with you, Miss Grey. When one has no one to talk to the last hour of the year is so dismal.'

'We must not let it be so,' said Sydney, pushing forward the dimity-covered arm-chair, 'I am wakeful enough to talk or listen for hours.'

'Thank you,' said Miss Jean, looking, with pink eyelids and scanty unpinned braids, most comically pathetic, 'I remember how a friend of mine and I, years ago, used to chat into the small hours when we stayed with each other—girls will, you know—and how we used to brush each other's hair. May I brush yours, Miss Grey? I should like the feeling of old times.'

'Certainly, though I wish you a better office,' Sydney said smiling, and let down her dark rippling locks.

'What a quantity!' shaking out the splendid profusion, till Sydney could not even catch a glimpse of the glass in front, 'ah! mine was thicker too when I was young!'

And then with some brushing and many pauses she told of her youth, purposeless tales as they seemed, till Sydney perceived they all drifted towards a certain point, one halcyon spring when Miss Hurst had basked in love's young dream, and been affianced to her father's curate.

'And oh! Miss Grey, I felt forced to tell you this for fear you should think me stiff or singular with him. I don't wish to be cold, but I must be stiff; it will be best; for he is coming here to be curate, and we must meet as strangers! He brings his

poor little children, for he is a—widower!'

'A widower!' said Sydney, now greatly interested. 'Then I suppose he married because you wouldn't have him?'

'Wouldn't? Ah, Miss Grey, that was my worst share of the trouble I once told you something about. I *couldn't!* Papa's money went, that should have been mine and Gilbert's. Marrying without an allowance from papa would have been impossible, wicked. So my prospects went. And papa's health. And Gilbert's sight. For he would never have had to toil as he did if we had not become poor. Oh me, oh me, you have no idea what a blow it was!'

'Perhaps I have, just a little.'

'No, you can't,' Miss Hurst's treble wailed on. 'I shall never forget Gilbert when I told him the grand investment had failed, that papa had made by advice of the

man he trusted above all others; and how we should lose everything. Poor boy, at first he was furious; then so miserable. Ah, he was hot-tempered then. He's drilled himself to something different now! I remember he went off to Taffy's, as we called——'

Sydney gave such a start, Miss Hurst apologised.

'I beg your pardon. My feelings got into my fingers. I brushed too hard; yes, Taffy's, our old nurse's. Gilbert took all his troubles to her. And she shared this one. For she had given over all her savings to the same man whose unlucky counsel misled my father.' (Out of the almost blank of earliest childhood rose that summer afternoon; the scent of flowers: the drome of bees; old Taffy's song: the tall boy striding up the path, then flung at length upon the bench. That was how,

when, and where she had seen Gilbert Hurst before.) 'So she too had reason to rue trusting Mr. Alwyn. Too hard again! Ah, I must not talk of it. It makes me forget myself. And please, Miss Grey, never mention this before my brother. The very name of Alwyn is like an old wound to him. I never utter it nor talk of Stillcote, where we lived. Shall I part your hair now. Why—' with a glance in the mirror opposite—'I have tired you out. You look quite pale. Talking has eased me, but it's time I said good-night or good-morning, for it's past twelve. I hope, Miss Grey'—sighing—'you have more prospect of it than I have, and I wish you a happy New Year!'

CHAPTER II.

MISS VILLIERS PROSPERS IN PASTURES NEW.

Civility, by now, demands attention to Sydney Alwyn's mother and step-sister, who, when last discoursed of, were turning their backs on scenes of lofty but bitterly-humiliated hopes.

Leaving St. Clairs, in the frame of mind both did, it is no wonder if even the liveliness of foreign travel, effervescent draught of amusement as it is to some, to them appeared flat, stale, and unprofitable. Mrs. Alwyn, released from surveillance of servants and neighbours, gave naturalness and ill-temper free rein. To the *garçons*,

the *portiers*, the white-coiffed *femmes-de-chambre* of the various hotels they visited, she was an affliction not readily forgotten. The '*grande dame Anglaise*,' who, with her superb command, kept them all dancing obsequious attendance on her exacting caprices, and then, callous to rueful looks, departed, bestowing on never a one a *franc* or a *pfennig* beyond the legitimate bill-scored terms of '*service!*' This species of saving formed the chief pleasure of the lady's first weeks abroad, and, combined with the relaxation of finding fault with everything provided for her everywhere, served as a good-sized safety-valve, through which to disperse the turbid irascibility that had possessed her since the downfall of her designs had driven her from The Dale.

And Miss Villiers extracted as little enjoyment as her mother from the first stages of their route. Cathedrals to her

were simply dingy buildings, a weariness to the spirit and chilliness to the body. They caused her to sneeze, which made her eyelids red, which injured her appearance; therefore she avoided them. Their three days on the Rhine she tolerated mainly because this style of travelling neither dustied her beautifully-draped tailor-made costume nor chafed her dainty boots, the preservation of whose glossy kid far overrode any question of exploring the ruined treasures on the legend-haunted banks. Assuming a melancholy, half of laziness, half of annoyance with her mother for projecting a plan she had not had generalship or luck to carry out, the younger lady adopted a *rôle* of injured sulkiness, saw the dark side of every day's conditions, and for the first month after they left England proved herself the very reverse of a cheerful travelling companion.

By the end of that time, however, both ladies began to tire of discords and minor keys. Each knew well there was a point of unquenchable importance on which it was desirable for them to resume harmonious action. Each approached it, not in the spoken vulgarity of so many words, but along side-ways suggested by circumstances, and thus it came about that, by the time they reached Lucerne with the intention of there making a lengthened sojourn, Mrs. Alwyn had once more donned her graceful affability, and Leonora had revived to interest in foreign fashions.

It was in the dawn of this happier state of affairs that the pair sat one morning on the balcony of the *pension*, where they preferred chief rank to an almost lost identity among the multitude thronging the huge hotels. Two boxes of raiment had reached them there from England. Leonora's

mood had enlivened over unpacking them. In creamy lawn she had put to shame a whole breakfast-table of ill-dressed tourists. Now she mused on the delightful effect of her toilette, idly picking oleander blooms off the great green tub by which she leant, while her mother studied one of Sydney's letters just fetched from the *poste restante.*

'"Well, and at work," she reports herself,' said Mrs. Alwyn, crumpling up the carefully-worded missive as though it had offended her: 'really,' glancing round to see no one was within hearing, 'your sister might belong to the lower classes by her expressions! However, while she is satisfied, I intend neither to complain nor to reproach her. Full forgiveness she has no right to expect of me at present. But it is a relief to have her decently settled. The thought of her harassed me frightfully the last month. Now, Leonora, I must

call back my spirits and attend to you again!'

Leonora raised her well-smoothed eyebrows. 'Or, mamma,' she said, 'I may see fit to attend to myself. I think if ever I am to do that it is about time I began.'

This extraordinary outburst of independence on the part of the usually pliant dispositioned daughter took Mrs. Alwyn thoroughly aback. Up went her eyeglasses to inspect the fair speaker, with some dismay, but that expression graduated rapidly through surprise and curiosity into gratification, as she followed the graceful gesture of pleased recognition, tempered with dignity, which Leonora was bestowing on some one passing below.

'My dearest child, is that——'

'The gentleman who rescued our luggage at Zurich? Yes, mamma. He passed us there twice on the Höhe Pro-

menade. He was with a slighter-figured man, but very distinguished: Count Küster.'

'*Count!* How do you know, Leonora?'

The young lady blushed.

'They were entering that pokey little musée, mamma, just as we were leaving. You were gone back for your sunshade. They bowed to me and passed into the first room. And I—I—looked at their names in the visitors' book.'

'And this gentleman is——?'

'Mr. T. Morecoombe-Wood.'

'Not titled, then!'

'No, mamma, but English, and very likely of better standing than a German count. He is not just an ordinary holiday-maker, I feel sure. Both those men in blue blouses were carrying his luggage just now, and—oh, mamma, he has turned back. He is coming here!'

And Leonora suddenly began arranging oleanders on her bodice, while her mother appeared wrapped in contemplation of the clear still lake, though veritably less absorbed in its beauties than in the chances of her own and her daughter's wounds getting speedily healed by the medicine of a desirable marriage.

Not to let imagination, however, outstrip common-sense, the mother shunned further discussion of this new-comer to the *pension;* and when dinner-time found Mr. Morecoombe-Wood filling the place of the last arrival at the dinner-table, he received from his (presumably) fair magnets thither no more obvious attention than from the other eighty odd sharers of the repast.

He was a man of fair height, inclining —not developed—into *embonpoint*, extremely pale, with short hair and moustache of

inky blackness; very quick and much-comprehending eyes, that never met other people's long enough for their own expression to be too patent; of an age still interesting to the opposite sex; of easy manner and conversation with his own; distinctly unobtrusive, yet a close observer might have noticed that he kept his attention very much on the alert for all that Mrs. Alwyn and her elegant daughter said and did. Though addressing them less frequently than the freedom of the *pension* would have permitted had he chosen to push familiarity, still, mixing with groups near by, he could glean from Mrs. Alwyn's well-weighed remarks that she was travelling mainly for her daughter's health; that with this view residence at home or abroad was immaterial to her; and that the chief disadvantage of a roving winter would be the want of society, her own home-circle

having lain among the very *élite* of the land.

This much acquired, Mr. Morecoombe-Wood's glance followed Miss Villiers with growing and—as day after day slipped by—less guarded approbation. A rainy evening bringing music to the fore, Miss Villiers was persuaded to expound, not a humdrum ballad that any school-girl could pipe forth, but the grand *scena* from 'Der Freischutz.' From the plaudits at its conclusion Mr. Morecoombe-Wood's were missing. He ventured to carry them—a separate offering—to the fair cantatrice while a miserable tenor was murdering 'Adelaide;' and he contrived to make them so impressive that thenceforth their intercourse grew rapidly freer, and soon afforded Mrs. Alwyn the insight she desired into the gentleman's individual history.

A party of noisy Americans, one evening,

were planning excursions on the water to watch the moon rise from a certain point.

'Would Mr. Morecoombe-Wood join them? Oh, he must; they were going to have fine times!' declared a Brooklyn belle, in high-pitched persuasion; and while she waited reply Miss Villiers' soft full tones happened to remark to her *vis-à-vis* that the sunsets from the Drei Linden were so lovely. She and her mother were going there directly. And Mr. Morecoombe-Wood resisted the lively American's invitation, and went strolling also towards the Drei Linden, asking permission of one couple he found there to share with them the enchanted hour, though one is bound to confess after they got together the sunset seemed entirely forgotten!

'Those riotous tourists are the bane of the Continent in summer-time,' he com-

plained. 'One gets so out of patience with them. I often threaten myself with returning to England for the empty months.'

'Then you never live in our own country?' Mrs. Alwyn asked.

'As little as may be of late years. When a man with enough, or more than is good for him, doesn't anchor in some domestic harbour early in life, he finds English society rather barren by the time he's my age. He gets rid of life more easily by wandering, and has to take every city in turn for his make-believe home.'

'Not "has to," surely!' said Mrs. Alwyn, very graciously. 'I'm afraid you confess yourself hard to please, if you say that.'

'An impeachment I plead guilty to,' the gentleman returned. 'Neither London

nor other capitals, nor lands native or foreign, have furnished temptation strong enough to fasten me to any hearth, I can truly say—up to this summer.'

The last sentence was added with a slight change of tone. Mrs. Alwyn looked keenly, but benignly, at the speaker, who looked at Leonora, who looked at the ground. And, had the sentiments of the trio been gauged just then, the germs of exultation might have been discovered in each breast, though all went gingerly to work towards securing their fruition.

Another morning later on they strolled under the trees by the lake's shore; and Mrs. Alwyn, filling up a pause with lauding the glories of Pilatus, Mr. Morecoombe-Wood said, laughing, that after his noble altitude our English peaks and fells sang small and even—this with sub-

dued watchfulness—'even Devonshire slopes turned into ant-hills.'

'Keswick I saw but once,' said Mrs. Alwyn, 'when I was first married to Mr. Villiers. Derbyshire I have never seen, nor'—with an expression that seemed to say, 'and she never wished to see it,'—'nor Devon.'

'The best of all, some say, and—Miss Villiers you look tired; here are two vacant seats;' then placing himself at angles on the grass, so as to command the countenances of both companions—'and the one I know most. I lived upon its eastern borders in former times, and I keep fancying it was there I came across your name, Mrs. Alwyn. "Alwyn"—yes, it struck me as soon as I heard it.' (Mrs. Alwyn's face clouded, spite of her effort to look unconcerned). 'And somehow I had connected it with a great smash-up

I remember hearing of there. I fancied it was a Mr. Alwyn who was hard hit in a mining mishap my people used to talk about.'

Leonora sent a scared look at her mother from under her long eyelashes. Oh, that that second marriage had been to some indistinguishable Smith or Jones! But Mrs. Alwyn met the emergency grandly. A recent lesson had taught her that up to a certain point honesty is the best policy. Moreover, this one man, detached from the narrow prejudice of English society, was different altogether from that little county clique about St. Clairs. Therefore, she girded her nerves, and, with quite a touching mixture of suffering dignity and perfect candour, answered,

'Ah, that unusual surname gives me no respite—no chance of casting our troubles

into oblivion. It *was* my husband whose property was lost in the disaster you allude to, Mr. Morecoombe-Wood. But, as my own fortune and my dear child's was secured beyond reach of harm, we would far rather remember that mercy than dwell on the other sad trial. The locality of the dreadful business I know nothing of. I feel I may beg you not to use *your* knowledge of it to keep us, or put others, in mind of a peculiarly trying event.'

'My dear madam, I beg ten thousand pardons for having spoken of it at all! Henceforth the subject becomes a blank to me. I should long ago have forgotten it, but for the impression made on me by its being so much talked of in our set—at the Highcoombes. But you say you are not acquainted with the families in those parts?'

'Not at all.'

'Ah, then, how the Highcoombes escaped being entangled in it wouldn't interest you, so I won't talk of it. They are the chief people in—that unlucky neighbourhood. Splendid place they have, too, though they are not as old as in the county as the Morecoombes. Annabella Morecoombe, 1780 or '90, married a Wood of Beechdale. That's how the double name took root.'

This pleasant gossip, never again encroaching on the forbidden ground, was willingly prolonged, often reverted to in the agreeable gentleman's now daily conversations with the ladies; and details, highly satisfactory all, dropped out, from time to time, of his antecedents. The noble family of Comyngham—which Mr. Morecoombe knew by hearsay only—figured conspicuously in Mrs. Alwyn's chronicles, perhaps with a touch of too

perceptible unction on their rank, but Mr. Morecoombe-Wood gallantly lent himself to the little weakness, though he in nowise shared it. This was apparent from his passing mention of a foreign title bestowed on himself for what he lightly termed a trifling good turn he had served a certain German Court diplomatically, a title he, an 'unattached man,' did not care a fig for, though his friend, Count Küster, was always urging him to use it. And, by the way, 'how much he wished he could have introduced his countrywomen to that friend of his, but family affairs had summoned him to Berlin. The Count had not much leisure, but what he had he enjoyed in English companionship. They were very intimate.'

It appeared so.

One afternoon found Mr. Morecoombe-Wood studying not only a letter just

received, but the addresses of sundry others enclosed in the wire-latticed rack at the entrance of the *pension*. He was pulling his moustache and using unparliamentary expressions below his breath. At the sound of a voitureful of travellers approaching the steps he vanished upstairs, and at the dinner-table Leonora's maidenly glance perceived his usual place occupied by a stout German paterfamilias, with three blonde daughters and a weak-looking youth, his son, around him. In the salon, Madame Vische gave Mrs. Alwyn a little note, with the remark, 'Mistaire Morecomfood had been vaire sorry for to go, but he could not vait vor ze ladies, he was vorced vor to hasten.' And the few lines explained a sudden request of Count Küster's (by reason of indisposition) to join him immediately, to which were added profound regret at leaving without bidding farewell

to Miss Villiers and Mrs. Alwyn, and sincere hopes that he might be able to meet them at Interlachen.

It was there the ladies had spoken of staying some fortnight hence, and never went fourteen days more slowly than those which crept by before they moved thither. Let one's aim be what it will, fixing intent desire upon it shuts out all surroundings else! So Griessbach was but a damp nuisance; Meyringen a dull little hole, the very Jungfrau no better than a sugar-loaf in a grocer's window to the imaginations whose foremost ground was taken up with a single figure, the well-born, well-dressed, ingratiating Mr. Morecoombe-Wood!

But at Interlachen he reappeared, and the slighted Jungfrau in the light of his advent and a young, romantic moon, became a thing of beauty and a joy—for the time being.

More pronouncedly attentive than ever, his experience as a traveller became invaluable to them. He negotiated Mrs. Alwyn's English bills, counselled their route when he should be compelled to run off to Vienna where he had invested capital after which it behoved him to look, shared their excursions, and so far progressed in intimacy that when consulted as to their winter abode, frankly arbitrated in favour of his own wishes. To imprison Miss Villiers in the Engadine would be barbarous. He would have advocated Berlin, where Count Küster would have introduced them to princes some and 'vons' innumerable, but then he should be jealous! It was at Paris he himself must chiefly reside. There were what in England we call 'boards,' 'companies' he was upon. With the new year he was bound to attend these. But business, for which having had no need, he,

with a shrug, had no taste, would take a different aspect if it brought him near Miss Villiers—and Mrs. Alwyn. Could they be persuaded to try Paris?

They could, and they did.

By mid-October they were installed in a charming *appartement* within stone's throw of the Arc de Triomphe. A few weeks later Mr. Morecoombe-Wood took up bachelor residence in a *quartier* not far off. A call or two established him as cicerone to his charming compatriots. Prudent inquiry on Mrs. Alwyn's part, through her brother in England, elicited the fact that this unexceptionable friend's family held foremost place on the Southern county-roll. His ever-increasing and ever-acceptable devotion to Leonora knew thenceforth neither check nor hindrance. The sun of the old year bid fair to set in such dazzling effulgence that Mrs. Alwyn could afford to

forget awhile the humbler fortunes of her younger child.

But hereon a letter reached her from Major Villiers, for which she was far from grateful. For the old officer urged that Sydney should be restored to her mother's side once more.

'The plan,' so he wrote, 'you imposed on Miss Alwyn and named to me of keeping her past action and present life *sub rosâ* is sure to fall through sooner or later. Pardon me, my dear sister-in-law, for saying unasked what I think, but I do consider that release from this social and domestic interdict would come more gracefully from yourself than through chance or other folks' inquisitiveness. I saw Mr. Drayton not long ago. It was with difficulty I evaded his close questioning about Sydney. If it is—as I trust—simply a question of her maintenance which sepa-

rates you, if you scruple to use the means of one daughter for the support of the other, will you permit me, out of warm regard for Sydney, to send you a yearly remittance which will, I think, cover the expense of her residing with you? This could be strictly between ourselves. It would gratify me and surely conduce to your own comfort.'

Mrs. Alwyn long balanced the pros and cons of this offer. The arrangement might be private: *i.e.*, nothing now or perhaps ever need be said to Sydney of the major's share in it. The conciliation would look well, would redound to her credit. The sum offered by the major would more than defray the cost of Sydney's living, and that was no mean consideration, for the hasty retreat from St. Clairs, the ill-considered purchase, and angry transfer of The Dale, had diminish-

ed her principal. Mrs. Alwyn appreciated and pointed out these advantages clearly to Leonora, but that more-than-ever elegant damsel made quite a Parisian *moue* at the notion of her step-sister's return, saying,

'Sydney's costume will be of the Ark description, mamma. She may impress Mr. Morecoombe-Wood with an unfavourable idea of our connections; or,' illogically capping this with a sincerer excuse, 'he may take to admiring—preferring her!'

'Not the least likely, dear, foolish child! It would be my immediate duty to make it known that she shared only *my* home, not *your* fortune. Mr. Morecoombe-Wood was saying only the other day it was a miserable thing for a woman to marry without *dôt*. It placed her at a disadvantage from the outset. I entirely agreed with him,

and said I should never permit my child to enter any family undowered. Sydney may come, for all that. He would never think of her now.'

'He' never had the opportunity.

A note, most coldly-worded, about which hung the odour of yet unpardoned offence, offered Sydney the option of return. Promptly came reply in shape of a refusal. Grateful (more than there was need for, had the writer known all), anxiously thankful for these late-flung crumbs of maternal solicitude, but still refusal: 'Mainly,' said Sydney's letter, 'because of something fresh I have lately learnt, mother, which seems to bid me stay at Wynstone, as the place above all others where I ought to go on working. I will tell you in my next exactly what I mean by this, if you will give me leave.'

'But I shall not give her leave!' cried

Mrs. Alwyn, quite ready to take affront at her overtures being declined, and possibly having dim suspicion of the reason. 'I require no explanation of what I understand only too well. It's the old story. Her will against my wish, and we very well know which always wins!'

So kind Major Villiers's scheme came to naught, and every thought of the little Parisian *ménage* now centred on seeing beautiful Leonora become Mrs.—or, as Continental society surely would say, —'Madame la Baronne Morecoombe-Wood!'

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CHAPTER III.

SYDNEY'S NEW WAY TO PAY OLD DEBTS.

It is to be hoped a better reason than the bald one imputed by her mother will be found for Sydney's refusal to rejoin Mrs. Alwyn by those who have followed her fortunes thus far.

For truly that chapter of the Hursts' history disclosed on New Year's Eve carried her with one great gust clean out of the becalmed haven of Wynstone's light duties, once more into the deep waters of indebtedness, which this time appeared unfathomable—past all her power of paying off.

Long after her employer had concluded her plaintive good-night, and, indeed, long after the agitated lady was asleep, and dreaming that Mr. Babbington brought three little daughters and shut them up in her dining-room, declaring she must take care of them for he could not, Sydney still sat wide awake, seeking up and down among her senses, for how she could fulfil the Tantalus task she had undertaken. For a long while the search was entirely unproductive, and she did so smart under the bonds of her incapacity, that she was presently fain to lay her head upon her arms and christen the year's first hours with a flood of hopeless tears.

But hopelessness and Sydney were never for long allies. The courage last summer's disasters had failed to quench mounted with this new occasion. Quickly she rose; noiselessly paced the room,

thinking. Money she had none wherewith to span the terrible rift in two lives, caused by credulous trust in her father's counsel; but youth, health, vigour, were hers. These she would spend uustintingly—ah, she would pour them out!—in aiding endurance of what was past cure. She had been wondering of late how long this service of hers would last. Now she knew. As long as she lived. Only at the very end should those she meant to dedicate her days to find it was John Alwyn's daughter who had been labouring to win back sufferance for the name now stigmatised as the source of all their troubles. Her sensitiveness was too acute to let her weigh aright the responsibility accredited to her father. Her generous pity, maybe, cast a glamour of romance over Miss Jean's story. But there was not a spark of romance, only pure, brave womanliness, without one

jot or tittle of other feeling, in the resolve she reached. Before a little locked-up cabinet she stopped. Took forth a faded likeness, and stroked it tenderly. Her eyes beautiful and steadfast as twin stars, shone out through the last of her tears. The warm colour stole back to her white cheeks. Her breath came fast. The wind outside was sobbing and wailing round the house. The rush of the river sang an angry second. Anon she had felt as storm-tossed as they. But now on her heart there fell a wonderful and childlike calm. Casting the incubus of her care upon a Power every day taught the better to trust, she stood at her window with clasped hands, looked forth into the darkness promising that invisible presence which was her life's companion, 'With the best I have, the very best, I will make them amends, Father!' And so met the New Year fearlessly.

The next morning brought her mother's letter. Chill though it was, refusal of its offer cost Sydney no light pang. The old hungering for affection asserted itself strongly at the first note of favour. But chained afresh, as now she found herself, not a hundredfold more temptation than Mrs. Alwyn's measured lines held out, would have taken her from Wynstone. Definitely her 'no' was written and despatched. The cause of that 'no' she dared not add without permission, well knowing it would only reopen the old bitter dispute, and, as this permission never came, under Mrs. Alwyn's perverse judgment she had to lie till time, the great redresser of many wrongs, removed the unmerited ban.

One confidant she had, Jacob Cheene.

To him she wrote what she suspected was no news, and back came the candid

admission that he had known throughout who her employers were.

'But while I heard you were peaceful at Capel Moor, with nothing to complain of, I thought my knowledge best kept to myself. The Hursts are kindly by breeding, and come of honourable stock. There were Hursts, gentlefolks, at Stillcote, generations before your own name was transplanted there from the Midlands, Miss Sydney. The father of these two was one of that quartet who used to meet at Stuarts every week. I knew that in their home you might be better done by than among richer and prouder people; and I thought that if ever this which you have just heard did reach your ears, you could come straight to me, if that course seemed best to you. It never entered my calculations you should take it so hard.'

Thus Jacob answered her, and urged,

with even-handed shrewdness and liveliest regard for his old master's daughter, that she might with a clear conscience hold herself exonerated as her father's vicar, from every vestige of blame in this loss of the Hursts. What Mr. Alwyn failed to forsee for himself, how could he foretell for others? No professional man would dare to give advice if his actions were to be thus after weighed. Miss Hurst had coloured her tale too highly. Miss Sydney had magnified the imputation; had accepted it too readily. She must let him, who valued his master's honour second to none but herself, arbitrate for her now. She must give up Wynstone, since she had learnt this, and come to him. He would so gladly have her if his home was not beneath her sharing. But he was getting better off—a little. All she had done last summer had set his narrow income free.

For a while it would be plenty for them both. By-and-by they would see what was to be done. And when would his dear Miss Sydney come?

'Never, good old Jacob!' was her silent verdict; but there came a haze about her downcast eyes, and a treacherous tremulousness about her soft, flexible lips, while with words loving and gentle as firm, she penned her answer to the friend her father's brotherly humanity had purchased for her fifty years before.

Miss Hurst was watching her with side glances; Sydney's reticence on matters personal was rather a sore point. That weekly letter always scented out whether written upstairs or downstairs, or in my lady's chamber, was a mystery she was burning to dissect. Now the writer's scarcely concealable emotion suggested its tendency as the one which to Miss

Jean's then state of mind appeared likeliest.

'H—m!' she said, stopping to regard Sydney sentimentally, with a knitting-pin pressed meditatively to her cheek, 'No bad news, I hope, Miss Grey?'

'No, oh! no indeed,' said Sydney, betrayed into disclaiming eagerness, 'it is only that some one is very good to me.'

'I see,' returned Miss Jean; 'very satisfactory.' Then she felt compelled to put forward another modest feeler. 'Your friend, or friends, if the same you went last autumn to visit, would be quite free to return the compliment to you here any day, if you wished it, for a few hours, I'm sure.'

Sydney, at this, knowing that Jacob, by name and person too, would surely be recognised, could only falter thanks, confused and blushing. Here-out Miss Hurst drew her own inference.

'Ah!' said she, 'I shouldn't be surprised if your correspondent would rather entice you away than come here to see you. I suspect this person, who is so good to you, is not altogether disinterested!'

Sydney fell headlong into the neat little pitfall.

'Indeed he is disinterested,' she cried, 'though he does want me to go——' then stopped with a sudden consciousness that she was saying far too much, and ended, reddening more vividly than ever, 'but I am not going to be so selfish—I mean it would be wrong to take advantage—oh! I mean, Miss Hurst, I am intending to stay here till——'

'Till circumstances fetch you elsewhere!' finished Miss Jean, drily: and, never imagining the interpretation put upon this interlude, Sydney finished her letter and hastened off to post it.

'Herself, as usual!' cogitated Miss Hurst, sola, for her brother was out on one of his riverside rambles. 'She never trusts anyone else to do that. I am confident she has had some difference with her family about marrying. It wouldn't hurt her to be more open with me. I might advise her for her good. But I suppose her good might mean leaving us, so perhaps things are best as they are. I don't know where I should find another like her. She seems to leave nothing undone to please me and Gilbert, though he doesn't notice it as I do. The last few days she has been more anxious than ever. Now I come to think of it, she really was quite affected by all I told her the other night. Very likely, though she doesn't talk much, she feels for us.'

Very likely she did!

That missive to Jacob nailed her colours

to the mast. Now she turned all her invention into the channel where henceforth it had to flow. Between the bounds of Miss Jean's elaborate domesticity and Mr. Hurst's more cultivated requirements, she must mete out what ability she had. Spare money for one: translate life into light for the other; and, while ransacking her faculties for means to these ends, fortuitous chance supplied them.

A sunny January morning exhibited with cruel distinctness the faded state of the drawing-room curtains. Miss Jean, apologising for the contrivance (in which Sydney's fingers helped) of turning sides into middle, lamented that the house, to look as it ought, wanted all the surplus of its owner's income: 'whereas mine,' she sighed, 'must go for Gilbert. I shall get shabbier and shabbier, but there is no help for it. Gilbert can do nothing, of course.

If there were any gentlemanly work he could learn, and carry on in the back room, to bring in a pound a week, it would be something. But there isn't, so I give up hoping anything of the sort.'

What she gave up Sydney seized on.

Through an hour of diligent stitching the plan matured: with next day's reading it was initiated, more boldly than it would have been somewhat earlier. For at last some clue seemed to be found to Mr. Hurst's strange manner. His sister had expatiated on Mrs. Preece's persisting in shaking hands with him, and 'pitying him as if he had been a baby, both of which naturally upset him.' Now Sydney remembered sinning in this respect. On a certain September evening she had taken his hand unasked, and, like as not, let her voice tell the pity she was feeling. Since then, assuredly, he had treated her differ-

ently, for which he was not to be judged as more fortunate men. Having erred once, in this direction, she would do so no more. Withholding every sign of sympathy, whatever she felt, she would win him back to their old footing, and so set her scheme afloat. The book placed for her next morning she asked leave to change.

'Might they read one they had gone through last autumn? Mr. Hurst had said it was worth a second study.'

Surprised, but shirking discussion, as usual now—though Sydney's voice was wondrous winning as she made the petition—he agreed to her wish. The book was on Philology. Presently came the paragraph Sydney had craftily aimed at.

'You said before, Mr. Hurst, you had a paper on this very point among your manuscripts.'

'Yes,' unwillingly, 'I think I have.'

'I hoped, perhaps, you would let me see it. This is too specialised for me to understand it.'

'My few remarks, Miss Grey, were simply local, and mixed up with other subjects. They would not repay hunting out. Something by Skeat on the shelf there would answer your purpose better.'

This was next door to rebuff, but Sydney, strong in her purpose, was not going to give way.

'Skeat is quite beyond me,' she said, cheerfully saddling herself with stupidity, 'I understand your explanations so much more easily; but I am afraid that is such a poor compliment, that you are sure to refuse them to me now.'

'If you really prefer them, they are at your service, Miss Grey.'

Half fearing from his constraint she had gone too far, Sydney unearthed the

manuscript from the writing-table drawer, read out admirably its clear and clever pages, and then, making the most of Mr. Hurst's visible gratification at her grasp of his style and subject, preferred another request.

'May I just look at the rest of the manuscripts here, Mr. Hurst.'

'If you choose. But they are not worth it, Miss Grey; they are incomplete.'

'Thank you for letting me, though. "Churches of a West County," "The River's Banks," "Before the Saxons." Why, there must be the making of a splendid book here, Mr. Hurst.'

He smiled at last.

'A book? Yes. "Splendid?" I'm afraid not. But whether or not, there can be no telling now,' sighing.

'No telling? Why?'

'Why?' he reiterated, as though the

question were cruel. 'Why, because as I said, those papers are incomplete, and I have no power to shape them into what they should be. They are sketches: the frame-work only of chapters. What might have been a book, must stand like a half-built, deserted house, Miss Grey. Wind and rain devour one. Fire will probably devour the other.'

'It has no reason to,' said Sydney. 'Why should the building not go on?'

'With a blind craftsman!' he exclaimed.

'With a blind master, if you please,' said she, hardening her voice; 'but a day labourer under orders, who can see. Please, Mr. Hurst,' suddenly changing to frank and fearless persuasion, 'if I am not too dull or too illiterate, will you let me try and put your volume together? Of course only the mechanical part. You would direct every line.'

For nearly a minute Mr. Hurst was silent, his colour rising. Poor Sydney was luring him into something beyond his old beloved world of letters. He had nearly steeled himself to wise refusal, when by way of strengthening her plea, she said :—

'Imagine how delighted Miss Jean would be, how proud, if your book brought only a little fortune in.'

'Ah, that she would!' he said, with instant acquiescence, not entirely glad. 'But,' slowly, 'I should not dare—I have no right to appropriate your time, your thought, in this way. I am most grateful, but it cannot be done.'

'You think I am not able to do my share. You dislike the idea yourself,' she said, not seeking to hide her disappointment.

'The idea I should revel in, other things being equal. Your share would be better

done than mine. Nevertheless, the project won't do.'

Speaking, he had drawn nearer than usual now-a-days. His quick hearing caught the inarticulate sound of vexation, with which Sydney turned away.

'Then,' she said, 'I can do nothing for you but read—read—read—for ever.'

'Read—for ever!' he repeated, gravely. 'Ah, I suspected it must grow wearisome. You tire of it sometimes.'

With a flash of womanly wit she saw a chance of gaining the end she was positive he desired, despite his words.

'Yes,' she declared, her eyes sparkling, 'I tire sometimes: a little. A change of work would be more pleasure than I can tell. Don't you *think* the book might be tried?'

Through another brief pause Gilbert Hurst pondered again.

Entrenched in blindness, poverty, dependence, he must be safe. This plan might ease Jean. If so, he should be a brute to reject it. Deliberating, to his most difficult prudence he was lost.

'Then suppose we try it,' he said, and Sydney so exulted she was nigh committing another breach of discipline, and giving him her hand again to seal the bargain.

Mr. Hurst had not overrated her share of the new task. With hunting up notes, shaping rough outlines, sifting, sorting, accepting, rejecting, parting fact from fiction, and making fair copies of each finished page, 'Round about my County,' drew out and kept in full play more power than ever Sydney suspected she possessed. More than that. It lit up the latent enthusiasm of her nature, repressed at home through all her opening girlhood.

And this enthusiasm, though an invaluable adjunct in the production of the book, was, like many another powerful weapon, dangerous for every-day use.

Unavoidably, constant comparison of thought brought the workers into closer communion even outside their mutual occupation, and Sydney discovered that without offending she could make Mr. Hurst share the pleasant relaxation of her own brain when their afternoon quantum was done.

Tired one February day when sunset warned them to leave off, she was fairly glad to look lazily out on the golden-tipped hills, and amuse her mind with nothing more consequential than a chattering troop of sparrows at the end of the garden. Bobbing their brown heads about, pluming their dapper little dun-coloured bodies, saying their prayers, or squabbling, or

telling the day's adventures; such a fussy and incessant riot the feathered gossips kept going, that sight and sound of them set Sydney laughing.

'What is it, Miss Grey?' Mr. Hurst asked from his end of the room.

'Oh! I beg your pardon,' she answered, feeling guilty to be amused at what he was cut off from. 'It's nothing but a comical party of sparrows.'

'Why beg my pardon,' he said, getting up and coming to the window himself; Miss Jean was receiving a caller in the drawing-room: 'I used to think sparrows fascinating fellows. Are they on that tallest larch.'

'Yes,' beginning to enjoy them again, 'they are arranging their evening toilette.'

'Just as they used to do! Many?'

'Ten, fifteen, thirty—oh! I can't count. They are making the boughs swing. They

look so droll. The light is so clear. And their little fluffy figures against the sky. Oh!' as the flutter of fifty pairs of wings filled the air, 'they are frightened; they are gone! No, here they come back; they are settling again. And,' excitedly, 'one has a long straw in his beak. Three others are trying to pull it away. But,' breaking off once more, 'what nonsense this must sound to you, Mr. Hurst!'

'Go on: go on,' he said, 'it sounds like a song I have been wanting to hear for ages.'

'Ah! another has come to help him; and the thieves are defeated. And off he goes with his straw to his nest under the eaves.'

'Happy little rascal,' said Mr. Hurst, with first a laugh and then a sigh. 'Thank you, Miss Grey, for a glimpse of the outer world again.'

And after that Sydney fell into the habit of chronicling for his benefit such common things as spring skies, or the first coming of the primroses, or the unfurling of the hart-tongue's tight packed brown-fringed fronds, and all such insignificant minutiæ as his sister had stowed carefully out of hearing. The which, and her brother's growing enjoyment of the same, might not exactly have secured Miss Hurst's approbation, but about that time the good spinster's attention was diverted from its heretofore chief object, and settled on a more absorbing one—herself!

CHAPTER IV.

CONTAINS A TENDER REVIVAL.

PERHAPS, though, that assertion is hardly fair. Certainly, the lady in question would have repudiated the imputation. It was not exclusively on herself Miss Jean's interests centred, but also on other individuals, who, as already heralded, appeared early in the year at Capel Moor, and who, with their environments, became of immediate and fast-growing importance to the mistress of Wynstone.

The first fortnight in January had been a time of restlessness and ill-concealed

excitement to Miss Hurst. She was exceedingly active, and very fidgety; found a multitude of small requirements about the house, made a variety of small changes, brought out of seclusion a quantity of her late cousin Miss Hammond's choicest possessions, hitherto stowed away for high day and holiday use, and altogether rejuvenated her little establishment to an amazing extent. Another alteration, once pronounced impossible, suddenly became feasible.

'Gilbert dear, as the days get longer I have been thinking we will return to old habits and dine at seven,' said his mistress, making the announcement as though it really was, what she possibly deluded herself into imagining, the outcome of special deliberation on his behalf. 'You seem to feel the evenings long. Oh! don't say "no," because I've observed it, and you

can't deceive me! I am sure you walk miles round that garden between seven and nine, to pass the time away, of course, and that shows you feel dull. Now, dinner will make a nice long break, and you must be sociable enough to stop indoors afterwards and talk to me and Miss Grey. The servants will have to be trained, of course, but I will undertake that. I can't have you growing gloomy and eccentric, you know. That would never do!' And having thus ingeniously regained the more correct hour for their repast, Miss Jean took another new departure in the matter of personal appearance.

Hitherto her wardrobe had seemed chiefly maintained out of Cousin Priscilla's excellent but antiquated stock, and if alteration in the fashion of the same involved cutting to waste, then the garment would be worn in its original skimp-

ness or amplitude rather than infringe Miss Jean's rigid law of economy. Hence ensued such costume as would have driven Leonora Villiers into hysterics, and required some schooling for even Sydney to look upon without a smile.

But now a revolution of modes took place. A dressmaker came up from the village and stitched a whole week through in one of the attics. Miss Hurst was perpetually vanishing to be fitted; continually consulting Sydney as to shades and shapes; and rehabilitated by this conclave of industry and taste, presented soon an improved appearance, which she sheepishly apologised for by a series of circumlocutory excuses, in the midst of which lay the one small transforming grain of truth.

'I ought to have seen to all this before you came, Miss Grey, but I was out of

spirits; Gilbert had worn me very much, not that I complain of him, but I was getting fagged with him. But as the year turns, why, one likes to brighten up. And when one's rooms look fresh, one has to polish up one's clothes to match. Not that any polishing will make me young again. Still I don't want to look quite the old woman, when—when—on Sunday morning! You will hear Mr. Babbington then, Miss Grey. Oh, dear, I wish I were cleverer at trimming bonnets.'

This speech was delivered while Miss Trotter, the rustic modiste, was downstairs dining, and Miss Hurst was inspecting sundry boxes of mixed millinery with the aim of producing a new head ornamentation for the next Sabbath. Her achievements in this way were rather terrible. All the finery collected by the late Miss Hammond for many years danced a sort of

country dance with Miss Hurst's treasures of the same date, changing partners in shifting positions, limp plumes now hiding rusty lace, presentable lace coquettishly concealing quashed flowers, aud the last of the careful lady's efforts always outshone its predecessor in ugliness. Now she eyed the conglomeration of smartness ruefully, saying with dejection,

'Having such good things by me I should not be justified in buying anything new. Especially when, as I said to Gilbert this morning, I have not paid for his last suit yet. But how to contrive anything becoming out of these odds and ends, I know no more than an infant in arms. Should you think, Miss Grey, this would do?' poising on an ancient speckled shape a bunch of violet velvet, red poppies, and golden oats (flowers out of season, snowdrops in October, blush roses in De-

cember, had a fascination for Miss Jean).

'N-o,' said Sydney; then at the ejaculation of disappointment, 'I wonder,' she ventured to add, 'if I could do it for you. Ah, I have a sister in Paris who could put it together beautifully.'

'In Paris?' exclaimed Miss Jean, on the *qui vive* for scraps of Sydney's history. 'Living there?'

'Only travelling with my mother. But,' quietly barring further questions, 'may I try the bonnet for you? What dress do you wear it with!'

'The maroon; I thought green satin with some of the dangling things off Cousin Priscilla's best cap would look well.'

Sydney shook her head. 'It must be black.'

'With these poppies then?'

'No. Nothing but,' critically, 'a buckle or two.'

'Not even these dear'—sentimentally—'*dear* little forget-me-nots?'

'Not even them. Let me do it as I like. Then come and see if you approve.'

And, remembering why and for whom she worked, Sydney used an hour to such effect that Miss Hurst returned to find, elated, 'a bonnet that actually might have come from a shop! So now,' with incautious gratitude, 'I shall be easy about how I look on Sunday. But, Miss Grey, I hope you have said nothing to my brother about who comes then.'

'Nothing. I should never think of naming what you spoke of in such a manner.'

'Of course not. I beg your pardon for asking. But there is a little nervousness about it. I shan't get over it till we have met as—as—as middle-aged people and strangers to—to everything we used to

think of. I shall put off naming—him—to my brother as long as I can. It is sure to reopen that miserable time—those wretched memories.'

This hit Sydney, robbing Miss Jean's ostentatious pathos of its almost drollery. She, too, anticipated Sunday sympathetically. Was pleased when Miss Jean went to church very subdued, looking so much her best, that country lasses in their pews nudged each other to mark the change. Felt the little jump her companion gave when the stranger's voice first sounded. Almost shared the wistful curiosity with which the Reverend Horatius Babbington's first love stole glances at his two pale-faced, flaxen-haired little girls, perched on hassocks in the rectory pew. And knowing instinctively the agitated lady's silence would last no longer than the end of service, hastened forward, leaving brother

and sister to walk home together. Then said Miss Jean, clutching at Gilbert's arm,

'Oh, what—what did you think of that sermon? A little different from Mr. Preece's, was it not?'

'Much longer,' said Mr. Hurst, unexcited enough.

'Longer! Surely not. But I wasn't meaning that. Oh, Gilbert, don't you know who it was? I could have told at the first word. You've not forgotten—Horatius Babbington!'

'Babbington!' he repeated, voice and manner softened instantly, 'why, Jean dear, my poor old Jean, how will you like this?'

'Oh, well enough,' she answered, swallowing obtrusive gurglings of anything but mirth. 'I can bear it. Especially for you. You are quite right. I am

only "old" Jean. And your Jean. And only dear to you. And that's all—all I want to be. The past won't affect me the least. For I know well enough there is no such thing as marrying for me, any more than for you. No home for me except with you, any more than there's a home for you except with me. You won't object to my being kind to those poor little children. But don't be concerned for me, Gilbert. I can meet Mr. Babbington as indifferently as any lady should.'

Spite of which declaration, Miss Hurst shed many tears at home over the miniature of a thin and interesting young divine, with wavy hair and beardless face, and a seraphic smile. The slimness was gone, for the reverend gentleman was inclined to corpulence, and the wavy forelock was swallowed up in advancing baldness. But Miss Jean's fidelity could

stand the shock of such mere physical change. To her Horatius Babbington was idealised as the winner of her young affections. His smile was still seraphic. Himself still, more than other men, most interesting.

In time the new-come clergyman made his first call, behaving with soberest propriety, though Sydney secretly resented his inquisitive inspection of herself, and still more his bluntness of perception in dragging from Mr. Hurst every detail of first failing, and then fully lost sight. That half hour's visit stamped him on her mind as bland, opinionated, amiable domestically, more widely selfish, theologically effusive, mentally beneath the standard at which he rated himself; and her first impression was correct.

But Miss Hurst saw in him no flaw. Through the visit she bore herself with

great discretion, but a stray remark as the guest was leaving, 'Surely that little table used to stand in the bow window of the Stillcote drawing-room?' threw her off her balance. That bow window was a spot dear in the heyday of her hopes. Mr. Babbington must have been dull of comprehension if in her confusion he had not seen that old ties were fresh in her memory. Miss Jean's perturbation flattered him. He was not dull. He returned to his lodgings and his children thoughtful and very satisfied.

Inevitably then the curate-in-charge grew intimate at Wynstone. Miss Hurst, by upbringing and nature, enjoyed regulating parish matters. Now her assistance was constantly claimed for them. At the outset Gilbert Hurst demurred at the weekly call, offered ostensibly to furnish him with masculine companionship. 'Don't

have Mr. Babbington on my account, Jean,' he said, 'it can't be pleasant to you, and we never knew each other much.' But Jean turned restive at this, replying, 'I'm afraid, Gilbert, you would like him better if he were a college friend, or that tutor you used to make so much of. I know he is only an ordinary, hard-working man, but poor papa was much attached to him, and for that reason I should have thought you would not grudge him civility.' And after that her brother could but make the best of the gentleman's society, even when it extended regularly over Thursday's dinner-hour.

Before long Mr. Babbington had communicated to Miss Hurst much of his personal career since they two parted, and Sydney—not Mr. Hurst, she noticed, —was made further recipient of these particulars.

'He was so unsettled, poor man, after he left Stillcote,' Miss Jean said, evidently deeply gratified at the fact. 'He tried two chaplaincies abroad, but then he felt he must fling himself into something engrossing, or—— So he went to Palestine. Of course, he overworked himself. He couldn't help it in the state he was. He had a wretched fever, and the consol's family took the greatest care of him. They had found out his value. One daughter, an excellent creature no doubt, devoted herself to him. He was lonely, weak, always so impressionable to kindness. It was natural, indeed, necessary, since the poor thing got so attached to him, for him to marry her. I should never blame him, never! But I *scarce*-ly think she was fit to be a clergyman's wife. He mourns for her, oh, most sincerely; but human grief is short-sighted. After

all it may be for the best that poor Mrs. Babbington, with her desire for English society, and a larger income, was taken.'

Apparently poor Mr. Babbington grew to look on his bereavement in this light. A great unanimity of sentiment became more and more visible between him and the choice of his youth. His children, two plain, loquacious little maidens, and a small shy boy, were perpetually trotting to Wynstone with messages—'Ought the deaf widow, named Wilkin, to have bread given her every week?' 'Please, papa wanted to know, was there anyone in the place who could knit little Horry some socks?' and so forth; and Miss Jean's word on these matters became law. Belle and Flossy would enter now without knock or ring, so much at home they grew with their papa's kind friend. Horry soon learnt to climb her knee, demanding cake

at all hours. No matter when they came, Miss Hurst found them no interruption, but ever turned their visit to some such charitable account as the mending of skirts, or stitching buttons on boots, or some neglected office of which the motherless trio stood much in need. All which was well enough, and only diverted from her brother part of the luke-warm attention she had ever bestowed on his greatest pleasures. But another phase of Mr. Babbington's influence took a less agreeable form. He himself had great fondness for probing Mr. Hurst's sentiments on subjects men are often chary of dragging into common conversation. Now Miss Hurst followed suit.

'I fear,' she said one day to Sydney, with the semblance of much anxiety, 'Gilbert, while he is after this book he fancies he can put together, never happens

to speak of—of—better things? Never talks about religion, Miss Grey?'

'Talks—about—religion!' repeated Sydney, startled, 'why, no.'

'Ah!' his sister sighed, 'it's a pity. But he never would. And people bound together,' with a heavier sigh, 'as we are, ought to be open as daylight on such an important point: ought to see through each other like glass! But I can't see through poor Gilbert. Mr. Babbington was saying, clever as he is, he is too reticent to be thoroughly satisfactory. Oh! if he would only talk, Miss Grey, and tell me exa-c-t-ly what he feels, how thankful I should be! For all he says, you know, he might be a—a—what *is* the word? One that reminds you of ash-stick or knob-stick, though it's neither of them precisely.'

'Agnostic!' cried Sydney, divided between laughing and indignation. 'Miss

Hurst, you would do well to be angry with anyone who called your brother that!' (Only a little while before, wearied herself by one of Mr. Babbington's copious discourses, in momentary unguarded petulance she had wondered to Mr. Hurst why every service took him so regularly to the little church. 'For the peace that always lies within its walls,' he had answered, and she cherished the reply, though self-conviction charged it with unmeant rebuke. This was the man whose sister was trembling over his spiritual state!) 'Indeed,' she went on, hotly, 'you cannot think what the word means, or never could you hint at Mr. Hurst's being that!'

'Ah! well, I only hope you may be right,' returned Miss Jean, slightly abashed, but dragged two ways as clearly as ever weak woman was; 'still, abilities are a great snare' (a parrot lesson assuredly),

'and we know poor Gilbert has abilities enough.'

And thenceforth it became increasingly evident that what had once been so much dreaded was developing now into an accomplished fact.

Some—not thing, but—person had come between Miss Hurst and her brother; and Miss Hurst did not fulfil her threat. She did not hate this person!

CHAPTER V.

TWO HEARTS STIRRED TO THEIR INMOST DEPTHS.

THUS a juncture was reached at Wynstone whereat standing still was impossible, for besides the garrulous little brook of Miss Jean's fluctuating fortunes, other currents were sweeping along, gathering silent force that presently, breaking loose, was to stir two hearts to their inmost depths.

Those fair spring months were to Gilbert Hurst a storehouse of unuttered pains; of pleasures more unutterable. To Sydney they brought labour over which, abandoning all thought of self, she

laid out her every endowment, from highest to lowest, on behalf of those whom unworldly honour called her creditors. Beyond the present she took no thought. That this present should ever turn and wound her sorely, she never suspected. So if Miss Hurst, now absent-minded, now fussy, wanted her assistance over a dozen immaterial trifles daily, it was always ready. She could but give what was needed. And if on Gilbert Hurst shone out the rarest, tenderest traits of her nature, why, that was neither her fault nor design: only the outcome of his necessity and her desire to pay him his due in some coin or other. So, as April smiled over the earth, Sydney pictured to him who could not watch the season's gracious footsteps, the lovely miracle of fresh-clothed woods, from red brown buds, and peeping crinkled leaflets, through May's coy bravery of out-spread

green, to the superb youth of queenly June; or the exquisite growth of pink-tipped fir cones, swaying, clustering, growing on dark-limbed parent boughs; or the frolics of a field full of bleating lambs in the river meadows, whose sunset sports began with craziest vagaries in the jumping line and mostly ended with a wild stampede round their safe hurdled quarters, and an importunate hurry-scurry to their mothers' sides. Earth's reawaking had never had such tales to tell Sydney as now when she courted all its signs to pleasure some one else. And to Gilbert Hurst never had it seemed fuller of happy human suggestiveness, than when its charms reached his senses mainly through a voice that was dearer to him than the singing of the south wind to the flowers!

But in that fatal knowledge lay much unintelligible to Sydney. Their book sped

onward towards conclusion, but it was the amanuensis, not the author, who triumphed most in its completion.

'Only two chapters more!' she cried at the end of a steady morning's work at which her own quick perception had been no mean help. 'Only two; then finished and folded, and away into the world it goes! Are you not glad, Mr. Hurst?'

'Why, yes,' he answered, 'how can I be otherwise?' But he was not glad enough to satisfy his questioner. There was a ring of sadness in his response, and against sadness, where Mr. Hurst was concerned, Sydney waged war.

Likely as not he regretted ending that fixed design which had occupied him so long. Well, it need not be the last of such attempts!

'We must set to work on some more of your manuscripts,' she said, cheerily, 'or

time will seem interminable till an answer comes back about this. What may we begin next?'

The 'we' had become natural through recent months. But now it seemed to grate on Mr. Hurst. Sydney coloured as he answered with reserve,

'I have nothing else in a finishable stage, even by your help, Miss Grey. My first venture with your assistance must be my only one.'

'Then all your other notes are quite beyond me!' (Could he have seen her face, his coldness must have melted!) 'There seemed so many of the time you were abroad. I thought, I hoped you could have made volumes from them!'

'Those notes are so crude and inexact,' he returned. 'Not all your—kindness and industry could shape them into readable form. Nothing short of another visit to

the scenes they treat of could do that. And such a visit I can never make, now.'

Except over his one grateful sentence Mr. Hurst spoke with extreme steadiness, bending himself to his bereavement with the unassuming pathos that always moved Sydney strangely. But pitying words she never harassed him with. All she could say was,

'Oh, how I wish I had read or seen more; or were clever, so as to help you more!'

He moved from the table uneasily.

'I felt the sun upon my shoulder just now. Has it clouded over? You must get out for your walk, Miss Grey.' Obediently she rose to go. 'Stay, though. Will you lay our papers aside before my sister comes in?'

Now she had it! Miss Jean was at the root of his disclaiming fresh effort. From

the first she had treated his book as a mere whim, hoping, with faint smiles, it might repay him, but—with shakes of the head—implying dismal disbelief in any such success. A little jealous to begin with, other more absorbing objects had made her indifferent to its progress. Marking this, Sydney had done her utmost to atone for the lack of sisterly sympathy in the literary babe by an abundance of her own. Now again she must to the fore, and fill the void.

'Ah,' she said, arranging the loose sheets, 'Miss Hurst is prudently saving her praise till she sees this in print. Then she will be elated enough! And as for me——'

Mr. Hurst had taken himself to the window, where, with his back to the room, he repeated: 'As for you——'

'Why, I am afraid there will be no

bearing me! Your copying-clerk will become—oh, such an epitome of conceit, you will repent——'

He stopped her almost roughly.

'Don't lose your time. Go for your walk, Miss Grey!' And, jerking open the long window himself, went out as though—so she read his action—he was in no mood to discount success as yet uncertain.

That June morning's work practically broke up the spring's congenial task. The final chapters were put together, but fitfully; Mr. Hurst sometimes pressing forward, sometimes delaying them. With spirits so varying, it needed all Sydney's knowledge of his hampered position to account for his changing humours. But there was enough for them in the attitude Miss Jean was assuming.

'I did very, very wrong,' this sister would often deplore to Sydney, who easily

discerned some foreign prompting in the complaint, 'to let my poor brother drop into a life of ease, or really one might say laziness! But it is impossible to look forward in all things. Now here he is, without means of getting a living, on my hands, poor dear fellow. And of course he naturally by now regards his maintenance as secure.'

Resentment was seething in Sydney's bosom. But for recollection of how the Hursts grew poor it must have overbubbled.

'I thought,' she said, slowly, 'you told me once Mr. Hurst so wanted to keep off burdening you——'

'Oh, don't use that word, Miss Grey,' cried Miss Jean, conscience-pricked when she heard her grievance from another's tongue.

'Well, wanted not to use your money, then. Wanted to struggle on for himself

ever so humbly. Is that not exactly what you said? And you would not allow it? So, should he be blamed now?'

'Who wants to blame him, Miss Grey? Not I, I'm sure. If anyone is to blame it is myself for being so short-sighted and so soft-hearted. I meant to be kind. I really was unjust. To Gilbert and—to myself.'

And this last aspect of the situation seemed continually rankling in Miss Jean's mind, oozing out in captious grumblings, constant carpings at things as they were, plaintive repinings at things as they could not be, alternating with fits of affection for her brother, displayed in hovering about him with melancholy caresses, desponding voice, and little sniffs suggestive of repressed tears.

'Ah, Gilbert,' she said to him one evening—it was Thursday, and the curate had

just taken an excellent dinner at her right hand,—'Mr. Babbington has been telling me of a friend of his who has done so well as a tutor near Cambridge. I wonder if you would have been so fortunate.'

'Too heavily handicapped, I fear,' returned Mr. Hurst.

'Still, it might have been well to try it.'

'Too late to wish it had been done now, Jean.'

'Ah,' said Mr. Babbington, with a complacent patronage of all his physical powers, such as they were, that set Sydney beating a fractious tattoo upon the floor. 'I'm afraid, my dear Hurst, you let that trial overwhelm you. Frail man is easily overwhelmed. *I* know that. Your calamity of course is of a nature to absolve you from ordinary criticism; but it is deeply regrettable that you did not rise

above it for once and for all. Deeply regrettable.'

'Jean,' said Gilbert Hurst, in a low voice. 'You have not forgotten how ready I was to do anything on earth to help myself! You remember the plan I had formed. You know why I gave it up. Does Mr. Babbington imply I am indolent by choice?'

'Oh, no, Gilbert,' his sister answered, in a tremor. 'He, Mr. Babbington, only means, as I mean, that if anything could have been done perhaps it ought to. Nothing else. And'—to her guest—'Gilbert did want to make the effort: really. But it could only have been near Oxford, where Mr. Vaughan, you know, might have recommended him. But that signified outlay: and leaving Wynstone: and speculation, as it were. And as—as—this

little property was my all, I didn't feel justified in the risk. But perhaps'—appealing with mournful, moist eyes—'perhaps I was wrong!'

'I am quite sure you meant to be right,' returned the clergyman, with emphasis very nearly tender, and Gilbert Hurst, a spasm of overtaxed endurance passing swiftly over his features, rose from the table with,

'I would give half my useless years to come if I had had my way, though, Jean!'

'Hasty, hasty to say that,' rebuked Mr. Babbington. 'It sounds, my dear fellow, like one of your rash boyish speeches. Do you remember how I used to check you for "hating" so readily?' (Sydney felt as though rapidly getting into condition to be checked for the same fault!) 'That unfortunate Mr. Alwyn, for in-

stance—forgive me for naming him, Miss Hurst,'—the lady put up her handkerchief,—'I have never forgotten how you poured your wrath out on his name. He is dead, I hear. You "hated" him less, I trust for Christianity's sake, before he left this world?'

'Because I was passionate and headstrong then, does it follow I must never alter?' said Gilbert Hurst, and pushing aside his chair with, 'Jean, you have finished?' opened the door for the dinner quartet to disperse.

'Shrinks from even friendly searchings!' said Mr. Babbington, joining Miss Hurst on the still sunny garden path. 'More openness would assuredly do him good, poor fellow!'

Where it would he had neither folly nor churlishness to refuse it. Sydney, suddenly blanched at mention of her father, was

impelled beyond resistance to know whether Gilbert Hurst counted him yet his enemy. Following to the orchard gate, 'Davis has fastened this awkwardly,' she said, stooping over the withe-bound latch. 'There, I have undone it, Mr. Hurst. That some one—Mr. Babbington spoke of —did he injure you—past pardon?'

'What' he said, halting instantly, 'do *you* rate me so poorly? No indeed, Miss Grey, John Alwyn's memory may rest for me. Long ago I learnt to forgive his luckless advice as freely as he would have forgiven my schoolboy rage.' She let him go by without another word, her spirit upspringing with great thankfulness. Mr. Babbington sauntered to her over the narrow lawn. His children had come to fetch papa home. Miss Jean had taken them indoors to clear the dessert dishes of sweets, while she mended—'so thought-

fully,'—Bell's jacket. Looking at Mr. Hurst in the distance, the clergyman said, gravely, 'Not sociable, our poor friend yonder, is he? You must find the hours he exacts of you very trying, Miss Grey?'

'No, I do not,' said Sydney, quickly. 'It is never anything but a pleasure to be useful here at Wynstone.'

'Well, Miss Hurst certainly appreciates your—er—unusual capabilities,' said Mr. Babbington, most politely. 'She has told me so. But that dear lady is eminently conscientious. She sometimes feels a l-i-tt-le anxious about you, Miss Grey.'

'About me!' Sydney flashed such point blank interrogation as her companion blinked under. 'Anxious! Why? Do I not satisfy her?'

'Amply. Amply. But, thinking of others before herself, as she always did, always does, she fancies her gain may be

your loss. She and I are friends of long standing. You will excuse her mentioning any small difficulty to me, Miss Grey. As a clergyman, I can perhaps say what she scarcely could. If you have family ties that should supersede these at Wynstone—don't disregard them: if, as some young folks have, slight family discords, heal them. Do not spend at Wynstone time you may afterwards regret as having withheld from closer duties.'

This was all very fine, very grandiloquent, unintelligible, impertinent! Between Miss Jean's surmises, and Mr. Babbington's interference, Sydney felt bewildered, half insulted. But she curbed herself with remembering it was not for her to be angry with Miss Hurst. The injured are always armed.

'I thank you, Mr. Babbington,' she said, self-possessed by some effort. 'I am glad

to remain here. I think I must trust my own judgment as to no higher duty calling me away.' And, Flossy running clamorously out just then, she bowed good evening to her new mentor, with great relief.

But the impression of his words was not so easily got rid of. It filled her with vague alarm. What could Miss Jean's hyper-anxiety for herself mean? What Mr. Babbington's bland high-handedness with her as with Mr. Hurst? Closer duties did he hint she should attend to! Why, she had none. That very morning had brought news from Paris. Leonora was this very month to marry an English gentleman: 'Suitable,' wrote her delighted mother, 'in every respect. And after the young people's honeymoon they and she were to spend the last half of the year in visiting different European capitals.' So Mrs. Al-

wyn 'hoped Sydney continued content with her self-sought position, as Mr. Morecoombe-Wood could not be expected to open his circle to her immediately, whatever he might generously do in the future!' They, prosperously enjoying life's ease, would be hardly likely to want her—ever? And even Jacob Cheene seemed glad of late that she had elected to stay at Capel Moor.

'I am getting too old, Miss Sydney,' his letters ran, 'to tie you to my infirmities, you are best among younger people;' so nowhere was she wanted but at Wynstone. Now if Wynstone, the roof to which she had rivetted her life, shook her loose——

But no! It was unfair to saddle Miss Hurst with the one project that would involve such change. Within that possibility lay a pain too intolerable to be faced!

But those June days, warm, luscious flower-breathing without, within went very crookedly. The book was ended and sent away; less hopefully than it had begun. Mr. Hurst was resolute in attempting nothing fresh, but he had lost his old power of listening placidly to Sydney's reading. Miss Hurst took to sitting much in the study; attending her brother officiously, never chattering in the old inconsequential fashion, but breathing out sighs like minute-guns. Mr. Babbington's courtesy to Gilbert Hurst developed into a peculiar mixture, brotherly, paternal, pastoral, neither very happy nor acceptable in any form, though it was refinement itself compared with the bearing of a cousin whom he brought one evening to Wynstone, introducing him as Mr. Montague Carle, from Pembrokeshire. This gentleman announced himself as a thorough practical

man. and, on that ground presumably, ignoring the shilly-shallying politeness which generally adorns social intercourse, contrived to make everyone on whom he bestowed his conversation marvellously uncomfortable.

'You've a nice place here, Miss Hurst,' he said loudly, before the whole party; 'lucky to drop into it! Horace told me it was your own. Pretty piece of property for a maiden lady; *or* a married one: eh!'

Had 'Horace,' indiscreetly divulged much more! Miss Hurst coloured, fluttered, and sent such timid glances at her impassable-featured brother that the Reverend Horatius hastened to disembarrass her. 'Was not this the time for those flowering rushes she had promised his children? And could he get them now?' So a move was made to the river-side, whereupon Mr.

Carle fastened his society on Sydney, remarking,

'You are not a fixture here, Miss Grey, I think? You see my cousin has told me the ins and outs of everything. Ah,' twisting round his active figure and ferret face for a good look at the house, 'it *is* a snug little box. Two, four rooms below; five, I suppose, above; servants' offices; bedrooms over them. Nice size for a small family. Pity it should be wasted on two, and one no business to be here, as it were.'

Mr. Babbington had indeed disclosed the ins and outs of Wynstone! Sydney caught her very skirts together from contact with this man's coat! Her mouth curved into unconcealable disgust.

'I think I can see some of the rushes Miss Hurst wants, if you will excuse me,' she said, and all but ran from him to the

water-edge, though she regretted freeing him when she saw him pounce on Mr. Hurst, and heard him start off a conversation of which the first words, ''Pon my honour, a handsome young lady you've got there!' were all too many for her.

What followed was equally unpalatable. Mr. Carle was great on blindness.

'I know a thing or two about that,' he boasted, 'for I've a dozen young chaps at my place by Pembroke, and none of 'em can see a stroke more than you can. Gentlemen's sons all. It's a speculation of mine. I train 'em and teach 'em, and'—jocularly—'make a pretty penny out of it. They don't want things first chop, as if they could see. You understand that. I haven't sunk much in silver spoons and smart carpets, I can tell you. Now, I should say an able-bodied man like you, Mr. Hurst, would do a deal better picking up

a living in such a place as mine than hanging on here, making an old maid of your sister, and being waited on by that pretty young party that's plucking yellow flowers yonder——'

'Miss Grey,' Mr. Hurst cried out, brusquely, 'whereabouts are you?'

'By the last willow: getting irises,' Sydney's clear voice called back.

'Then,' peremptorily, 'move away. No, stop. Let me come.' Moving straight as a dart along the bank he knew every inch of, till he reached her; then, 'Never lean over for flowers and rushes just here,' he ordered. 'Half a yard from the edge this is the deepest spot on the bank. A slip would take you into ten feet of water——'

'And there'd be no getting out of that, young lady,' put in officious Mr. Carle. 'So just you mind what Mr. Hurst says;

of course he only tells you what's for your good.'

He looked very knowingly from one to the other, but neither face betrayed any sentiment, except one not flattering to himself; indeed, Sydney shrank into such frigid irresponsiveness that Mr. Montague Carle was as willing to get away as they to bid him adieu.

Miss Hurst watched her brother furtively when the callers were gone and they three had returned to the drawing-room.

'Mr. Carle is an excellent business man I understand, though he may not be very polished.' No reply to this from either listener. 'I hoped you would have chatted with him longer. For,' moving ornaments restlessly about, 'it is too dusk to read. And I am not inclined to walk any more—and—but oh, Gilbert, if *I* find the evenings long, what must you do?'

'Do you feel them long, Jean? You used not.'

'Oh,' fretfully, 'people are not always alike at all times. How I wish you had taken to music, as poor papa did, though to be sure it made him more intimate with that wretched Mr. Alwyn, and so brought us no good. Don't say "wretched"? Well, I think he was, Gilbert. I feel it more and more. The "'cello" was papa's instrument, Miss Grey. He played so well. When he was young, he was offered two pounds a night to join an orchestra. Two pounds a night! Fancy if my brother could have earned that!'

'Could have earned! Could have earned!'

Sydney saw him turn away. The cuckoo cry was too hard to bear. Some-one must speak!

'I fancied neither of you care for music,'

she said. 'I have not once heard your piano,' looking at the never-opened instrument.

'Oh, I like it well enough,' Miss Hurst returned, indifferently. 'And you used to profess to be fond of it, Gilbert. But I fancied you cared nothing for my playing, so I gave it up. Some—people—used to like it, but no doubt it sounded poor to you, Gilbert——'

'Jean!'

'So I never even asked Miss Grey, for fear she might not be more successful than I was.'

The speech ended with a querulous choke.

Sydney moved to the instrument in desperation.

'It is so long since I sang, I may offend you both; but I shall like to touch the keys again,' she said, and sat down to the

Broadwood, tuneful still, though old.

The room was so still and full of soft twilight. The very birds outside were gone to sleep. Nothing seemed to stir save the ticking of one small timepiece, the throbbing of these troubled human hearts. Unbidden except by the tense necessity of the moment, unpreluded, except by its few simple chords, Sydney's song broke the silence.

'*Oh, rest in the Lord. Wait patiently for Him.*

'*Commit thy ways unto Him and trust in Him. And——*

'*He shall give thee thy heart's desire.*'

She never thought of how to sing it; only put into it the unformulated imploring of her own soul: knowing that Gilbert drew nearer and nearer, mute, not emotionless.

When she ended, poor Miss Jean thanked

her volubly, tears dropping freely down—but her brother had left the room without a syllable.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TURN OF A LONG LANE.

If there be truth in the adage, 'Coming events cast their shadows before them,' then the result of Mr. Drayton's well-planned gift to Dr. Dacie may be taken as apt example of the same, for it certainly brought professional luck back to the Gate House, which seemed prophetic of better things that followed.

Whether the cob had anything to do with mending matters, or whether, having had their turn in the trough of the sea, they were now to rise on a crest of the

wave again, must remain a moot question, but just now the outer ring of patients began to discover that after all they preferred the old doctor to his younger rival, whose bills were apt to be as long as his learned phrases. Moreover, 'Alexander McAndrew, Esq., M.D.,' as he preferred to be addressed, made a grand blunder in his first visit to Oakleigh Place. Misled by an inaccuracy of message, he had gone spanking off thither on the day Mr. Drayton was at St. Clairs, in delighted anticipation of physicking through some complicated disorder the Earl or Countess, or a Lady daughter at least, building on that base a vision of county practice that would turn his dog-cart to a brougham, his 'buttons' to a full-blown groom! But woe to his ambition! The patient was the house-keeper. The malady a simple sprain. Alexander McAndrew felt hugely disgusted,

and revealed his feelings. When his back was turned, 'We won't trouble *that* young man to come here again!' said the housekeeper, and the fruit of that affront was a summons for Dr. Dacie, and Dr. Dacie only, when a month later an upper housemaid fell ill with sore throat. 'The Scotch gentleman don't seem to think us servants worth troublin' for, my lady,' Mrs. Pounce had reported, and that settled the Scotch gentleman's business. So what was one man's poison was another man's meat. Six servants obligingly took sore throat one after another. Dr. Dacie attended them carefully and kindly. Then the epidemic attacked Lady Gertrude. He treated her with precisely the same kindly care, mixed with old-fashioned courtliness, which pleased immensely. Then he put a feather in his cap by discovering a mischievous drain; established himself as Lord

and Lady Comyngham's trusted medical adviser, and by consequence soared into popularity again throughout the neighbourhood. Other people besides those at Oakleigh paid their bills promptly, and Mary soon picked up lucky-pennies enough to pay hers.

The doctor found prosperity better medicine for himself than any in his dispensary. His wife brightened up like the affectionate old satellite she was; and if his daughter's satisfaction at this new turn of the wheel had any flaw, she kept it well and unobtrusively in the domestic background.

It was on one of those last May days when great perplexities were approaching at Wynstone, that events not unconnected with them were in progress at St. Clairs. At noon 'Brownie' had just trotted off with Dr. and Mrs. Dacie, to lunch with an

old acquaintance at a distance. Very cheerfully the elders had started on their modest dissipation. Ashamed of herself for having to make an effort in reflecting their beaming good-byes, their daughter turned indoors with the wise determination not to sit down and give rein to the depression that overhung her, but rather to disperse it by some vigorous distraction. A neatly-labelled phial in the hall gave her the plea for a six-mile trudge. Her midday meal the matter for a few minutes only, she released the factotum to 'Brownie' and the garden from his errand to Oakleigh Lodge, undertook herself to deliver the medicine there, left word where she was going, and thither set forth in all the freedom of having no one by to see if she were looking glad or sorry.

For a moment she had debated over best or second-best hat, deciding for the latter;

a suspicious haze was coming up with the wind, and, moreover, as she thought rather wearily, out of tune with the mild, promiseful day, 'Nobody cares how I look!' so in sombre guise altogether off she went, her mind obstinately playing variations on that dirge-like theme all the way along by the broom-girt banks and briar-scented hedgerows.

But, reaching the lodge, she had something else for a time to think of.

Her knock unheard, she opened the door, with 'Mrs. Rand, I have brought your baby's medicine. May I take word to my father how the little one is?' and not only the keeper's wife replied, but Lady Comyngham came forward too, greeting Miss Dacie most graciously.

'How kind it was to walk over for that! Just like her father; so thoughtful. And now Mrs. Rand must keep baby warm, and

do exactly what Dr. Dacie told her, and Miss Dacie must positively come up to the house as she was so near, and lunch with her and the girls; no one else was at home; but she would not hear of her going that distance back without refreshment.'

Vainly Mary, not at all anxious for the honour, protested she *had* lunched. The Countess would hear no excuse, but, with good-humoured imperiousness, marched her reluctant guest up the long drive, paying her the compliment of making just such conversation *en route* as set her at her ease.

'They were so fond of Doctor Dacie; so glad they had a man like him at hand. She was talking of him to her son Edward's wife the other day. And, by the way, had Miss Dacie been to see Mrs. Edward Duvesne! No? Oh, then, when would she go?'

To this Mary responded with honest frankness,

'We are not rich, Lady Comyngham; we are only nobodies; I thought it would look like presumption to call at Oakleigh rectory. Or, more truly, I never thought of it at all.'

'Then, to oblige me, think of it directly,' said the Countess. 'My daughter-in-law is a sensible little person. I am getting to know the people about here better now, and I very often hear of you in my travels. I shall take it as a favour if you will put Edward's wife into the ins and outs of her parish. She will appreciate the kindness and she will appreciate you!'

Lady Comyngham understood the art of gratifying. Her daughters were as pleasingly skilful. Mary soon forgot her winter-beaten hat, and enjoyed first the splendours of the Oakleigh calceolarias,

and next half-an-hour's rest at the luncheon served with delicate appointments such as seldom fell to her lot. Regretfully her memory was recalling her last hour there, and Sydney with it, when, *clairvoyante* as it seemed, Lady Comyngham asked,

'Can you tell me, Miss Dacie, anything of that charming young friend of yours, Miss Alwyn. I confess to inquisitiveness about her. I imagine no one can enlighten me better than you.'

'And I cannot do it at all,' answered Mary. 'I only hear from her just enough to know she is not forgetting me.'

'Travelling with her mother, I suppose?'

'Oh, no. She is in England.'

'England! What; has not that long visit her mother said she went on ended yet?'

'Visit,' echoed Mary, 'I thought—' then she stopped, colouring confusedly.

The Countess looked at her keenly.

'I suspect,' said she, 'that visit was a —myth, to put it civilly. Will you mind telling me why the child went away at all? I am really asking for something beyond curiosity.'

Mary hesitated.

'Sydney hardly gave me a plain reason, Lady Comyngham. There was, I think, some—difference—between her and Mrs. Alwyn. Mamma went over and spoke of it, and brought away the idea it was about a—a—marriage.'

'But you did not think so?'

'N—o!' Mary had to confess. 'I hardly thought it was that exactly.'

'And you were right,' exclaimed the Countess. 'And I am right!' nodding to her daughters. 'Mrs. Alwyn insinuated the story of an engagement to me——' ('There was no engagement,' said

Mary), '—and then some fanfaronade about its breaking off. Now there are two things that upset families. Matrimony and money. This was not matrimony. It was money. Used that pretty Cinderella as my children called her, because she was always getting left at home, to tell you of her money arrangements, Miss Dacie?'

'Only,' said Mary, naïvely, 'that she wished she had more of it! Till—why, yes, just before she went. Then she was so delighted at coming of age, for she was to have—six thousand pounds, I think, of her own.'

'There!' cried the Countess, excitedly. 'The secret is out! Avena is told truly. Miss Dacie, be proud of your friend. She is worth her weight in gold!' Then, seeing her hearer greatly bewildered by this outburst, Lady Comyngham explained how

her daughter's maid had disclosed the grievous loss of her parents' savings, and Mrs. Alwyn's insulting reply to their appeal: stopping Mary's quick 'Sydney knew nothing of this!' with, 'Of course not. Or not up to last summer. Then she must have found it out. Did I not hear of her going into the Midland counties—?'

'She went—oh, poor Sydney—to fetch my mother home from Cheddeley.'

'And there probably some chance enlightened her. How was she when she came back?'

'Why,' remembering only too accurately, 'changed, Lady Comyngham. I recollect it all now. And I only saw her once again. When she bade us good-bye so strangely.'

'Then depend on it there had been battle royal in the meantime, and the

result was the poor wretches who lost their all through Mr. Alwyn's misfortune got paid at last with his daughter's money. Miss Dacie, I envy you your friend. I would go a good deal out of my way to shake hands with her again!' and the Countess ended with Lewis's story, transmitted through Lady Avena, of how the various sums had been distributed through a clerk of Mr. Alwyn's.

'Jacob Cheene!' cried Mary.

'Yes. That was the name. And the giver of this money would not be known, though Lewis and others of the repaid list had put their wits together, and come to the conclusion it must be the old lawyer's child. 'And if so,' declared the Countess, with acrimonious emphasis, 'that mother of hers of course prefers such action kept in the dark, as she did what led to it. But, "honour where honour is due," say I.

Once let us be sure about this, and then trust me to let people know why *Miss* Alwyn, at any rate, went away from St. Clairs!'

Mary's head was fit for no news after this. From such a source she might carry her tidings to Mr. Vaughan. With him discuss the right to seek out Sydney's retreat. So luncheon ended, and all offers of being driven back gratefully set aside, she started homeward,—Lady Gertrude burdening her with choice flowers, Lady Margaret insisting on lending her an umbrella, the Countess convoying her through the park, imparting as they went along intelligence of her elder son's approaching marriage to an heiress, of her youngest daughter's equally satisfactory engagement: 'So,' said the pleased mother, 'after the rectory setting the fashion, all the young people intend to follow it. We

must see you at one wedding, Miss Dacie, and you shall hear all about the other too, if you care for such things. Good-bye.'

After such kind farewell Mary should have gone away mightily elated. But somehow those anticipated nuptials struck a weak nerve.

For a space they blotted out even the intelligence concerning Sydney. 'If she cared for such things.' Sooner or later what woman does not! It was all very well, having intimacy with these Oakleigh grandees pressed on her, but the attention was akin to offering stones when one badly wants bread! Why she was so foolish as to hanker after the unattainable, and at her discreet age cry like a baby for the moon, our good doctor's daughter knew not, but such was her predicament that afternoon, and before she had pulled through to more sensible

regions, lo, the moon stood before her! Her moon, that is to say; Mr. Drayton.

He was waiting at a branch of the road, and at first sight of her advanced with undisguised pleasure.

'I feared I had missed you, Miss Dacie. Your servant said you were this way. But I have watched an hour for you.'

'For me!' stammered Mary, as he took her hand, 'I had no idea you were at St. Clairs.'

'Nor was I till noon. Then I left my bag at the rectory, and came on to you. For I wanted so to see you.'

Mary remembered why he wanted that last Michaelmas. Was she going to hear of more marryings? Of Sydney's at last? She turned her head away and moved forward, Mr. Drayton keeping pace with her.

'In fact,' he went on, finding she said

nothing. 'I came on purpose to see you, and say—something. Won't you put up an umbrella? It's raining.'

Thus adjured, Mary unfurled the Oakleigh *tous-cas*, small shelter for one, yet Mr. Drayton begged half.

'My shoulders are getting wet,' said he, 'will you let me hold that between us?' And this being accorded: 'If you will take my arm,' he added, 'I think we shall get along better.' And in that compact order they continued progress, a sheep looking over the hedge setting Mary blushing.

'Now you have not asked,' said her companion, 'what my important remark is to be.'

'No. I forgot. What you came for,' she returned. 'I suppose, Mr. Drayton, it is about Miss Alwyn.'

'It's nothing of the kind. It's about Miss Dacie.'

Mary's pulse gave a mighty spring. 'I want to tell her—tell you—that I have prospered amazingly this last year. I was not sure of my luck last autumn, so I wouldn't talk of it. Now there is no mistake about it.'

'I am very glad—Mr. Drayton—to hear of your good fortune.'

'Then, if you are, will you go shares with it? I'm no hand at fine speeches, but I care not a fig for property if I can't have you with it. Such as I am, will you take me? Yes or no, Mary?'

To think, oh, to think here was the inaccessible moon come down and begging to be received!

Mary was for a minute so dizzy she had to hold Mr. Drayton's arm quite tight, which he enjoyed very much indeed. Then she contrived to let him know what he desired, with such true womanly gladness

in her nervous sentence, that her escort, assured no one was in sight, was constrained to shut out the landscape with that useful little umbrella, and confirm the contract without loss of time.

The shower came on so smartly then they had to shelter under an elm. Elms were Mary's favourite trees from that day forth. There Mr. Drayton made an exorbitant proposal. 'We need not wait as if we were just out of our teens, Mary,' said he. 'Can you be ready to get married in a fortnight?'

'A fortnight. Oh, no; no!'

'Why not?'

'Because there will be so much to do; and—things to buy.'

'We can buy them in London. If you get your bonnets alone, I may not like them.'

'Are you so exacting about fashions?'

'I am. For example, you must always have a bonnet like this one;' examining so closely Mary had to retreat.

'Oh, foolish man! This is not a bonnet but a hat, and a very old one!'

'Then keep the pattern, for you never looked better!' Which was true enough. No Kalydor on earth beats the bloom of happiness! 'And now, for fear you should forget what you've promised, hadn't I better give you a ring?'

'R-i-chard! Did you make sure, then?'

'No, I did not. But I happen to have one by me that may fit.' And out came the identical diamond that Mary had disposed of nine months previously, following on which so much more had to be said that, when he took out a watch she had also seen before, time had fleeted so fast they had to set off for the Gate House in good earnest. Then Mary began to get

in a tremor. What would her father say? What would her mother do without her? And—with a remorseful throb—what would Sydney Alwyn think? Would she mind this?

'Mind it? Only be too glad,' Mr. Drayton assured her; 'Miss Alwyn knew what I was after all through. I was in hopes what was bringing me good luck might be doing the same by her. But I was out of my reckoning there. You can't understand me, Mary? And you have something to tell me about her? Well, I must tell a long tale to the doctor to-night, of how I have means enough to come stealing his daughter and make all the amends money can for the theft; so then if you sit by me and listen obediently, you'll hear all about everything, Miss Alwyn included, and we'll compare notes, and by-and-by you and I will go together and find her.'

And that wondrous 'you and I,' the charmed duality, which, from Adam and Eve's days, is ever making new Edens on this earth, absorbed them both till the doctor and his wife came back to be enlightened, rejoiced, aggrieved, over Mary's confessions and Mr. Drayton's demands.

The marrying in a fortnight could by no means be agreed to, but the suitor, backed by the rector, pleaded so well, a month's delay only was at last compounded for.

'And some of these days I shall use for an odd purpose,' said Richard Drayton, when he and Mary next day went to stroll in the garden for ten minutes and stayed three hours, 'for, to be honest with you, I have to clear my character before you marry me. A rascal whom I worked with in a Brazilian mine decamped and left me under a cloud with the owners. It cost

heaps of time and half my earnings to set myself straight with them, but I did it. Still this scamp is at large and might turn up when least expected, to blacken me again. I've got a hold on him now by accident, and I mean to track him and make him recant. You'll let me stay here a week? Then I'll start after this business. And then come back for you as long before the twenty-seventh as the rector will have me. Oh, and do you mind where we go after we've bought bonnets for a week in London?' Mary, with her pretty blushes, had not a wish on the subject: 'Then you shall come and see some one I will tell you of between now and then. I'll send him a line beforehand, but you shall not be announced till I take you with me and say, "Here, Hurst, old fellow, I've brought my wife to call on you!"'

CHAPTER VII.

WAITING.

For a few days after the uneasy evening last recorded at Wynstone, the small household fell into what was less a calm than a lull, too full of watchfulness to be real rest.

The ending of his book maybe released Mr. Hurst's attention for another subject maturing under his sister's roof. Her rapid flights from downright crabbedness to unexpected complaisance, from spasmodic garrulity to silence maintained to the verge of gloom, filled him with strange thoughts,

fears perhaps, but such as, side by side with others in his breast, drove him into reserved yet most expressive anxiety of waiting.

Waiting. And that was precisely the spirit that possessed Sydney too. A mental unsettlement, such as matches the physical disturbance, which in the heavy haze of sultry noon prophesies 'there must be tempest before night.' An expectancy, whether of hope or dread, she knew not. She too waited, and like Mr. Hurst, turned intuitively to Miss Jean as the mainspring of her next move, be it what it might.

For nigh ten days this lady was, as we have said, pronouncedly odd and out of sorts. Her clerical friend during that time gave them less of his company than heretofore. When he did appear there was a hesitancy in his manner of approaching his hostess, a studied effort to propitiate

her brother, which Sydney would have preferred to his former demeanour, had it not roused suspicion of something it made her angry with Miss Jean to think of.

But then she, last of any, had right to be angry on that score. Sydney tamed her temper with that reflection pretty constantly, and exorcised fault-finding by setting herself to much about the house neglected by Miss Hurst in this disorganised interval.

She put the study shelves in order among other things, re-arranging the volumes more by sequence of subject than by size and shape, so that Mr. Hurst could more readily have the limited pleasure of handling the companions of his happier years. While at this one morning he entered the room, and having heard what she was doing and thanked her only by a smile, asked, 'Would she undertake

something else for him: not very troublesome, he hoped, but he was afraid his sister might find it puzzling.'

'Then puzzled she need not be, for I shall so gladly do it!' said Sydney, coming down from her steps: 'What is it, Mr. Hurst?'

'To sort my manuscripts, such as they are, foreign and home. You will find a set of loose notes on Gothic buildings and pencil sketches belonging to them. If you will place these in order, they may be worth a trifle.'

'You have changed your mind!' Sydney exclaimed. 'I have seen the drawings. I am almost certain I can etch them. You will begin another book!'

'Not at any price!' he answered brusquely, backing towards the door as Sydney joyfully advanced, 'I merely want to sell these things as they are. A

magazine writer might give a pound or two for them. I'—as though driven to say it—'I would not have asked your help, Miss Grey, if any one else could have done it for me.'

'Oh, why not?' she returned, her brightness all evaporating. But to this Mr. Hurst only made indistinct response as to 'trespassing too much,' and walked away, leaving Sydney to begin her assorting downcast and sad.

Mr. Babbington dined with them the next day. Before the meal he talked some while aside with his hostess, and presently at the table asked Mr. Hurst if he were intending to go to the Jervis's on Friday: these being people who for a couple of summer months rusticated and fished at Perristone, a little higher up the river. Slight acquaintance, begun the previous year with Mr. Hurst, was followed

up this season by invitation to dinner.

'For you only, Gilbert,' Miss Hurst had commented on the note, arrived that morning. 'Mrs. Jervis is down, I understand, but they have not included me. Oh dear, no! Perhaps they have never noticed me. Or if they do know there is such a person, why, I'm only your elder sister. I have no position to make anyone take account of me. Don't be offended at it, Gilbert. I'm not. I'm above being offended, though I can't help feeling it. You'll go?' But Mr. Hurst had told her, gently, to decline. He cared nothing whatever about it: and Miss Jean seemed gratified. Now she appeared to have altered. Answering for her brother—'Oh, he must certainly accept,' she said; 'to oblige me. Gilbert, you really, really must. Etiquette is nothing at all to me, so long as you get a pleasant evening.'

'So I will call round and walk up

with you,' offered Mr. Babbington; but Mr. Hurst replying, 'It brings you out of your road. I would rather make my way there alone.' 'Then I will return with you, at any rate,' persisted the clergyman, with a meaning glance at Miss Jean: 'your sister, will feel easier if you agree to that, I know.' And Mr. Hurst acquiesced rather than combat such a trifle.

At seven o'clock on the day of this dining at Perristone Sydney wandered from garden to drawing-room, intending to write there part at least of her letter to Jacob Cheene. Miss Hurst was cutting out jackets for the small Babbingtons in the study. Mr. Hurst she imagined gone. But there she was mistaken. Not due for another half-hour at his entertainers, he was standing on the hearth-rug, waiting before he started for the

farewell inspection his sister had required, and Sydney halted on the window-step, letting her gaze, first of surprise, then of something more, rest on that tall, well-built figure in English evening uniform. Another June evening one year ago, another man so dressed she remembered vividly, and hung her head, as if for that wretched bubble of misdirected fancy she owed apology to the presence before her. He could not see that mantling shame, nor divine that secret self-reproach; but a keen sense of both bade her draw back, away from him. An instant and she would have been gone, but just too soon Miss Jean came hurrying in, one hand bandaged with a handkerchief.

'So you are ready, Gilbert! Or think you are. But, Miss Grey, would you very kindly give me the brush off the hall-stand? Thank you. Stretch your arm

out, Gilbert, I hate a speck of dust on broadcloth, and of course you can't tell if its there. Do you remember how I used to brush you in yonr school-days when you never would stand still? Dear, dear, to think I have to do it now, and you—and everything—so different. But I never have repined. I don't mean to; even if—oh, Gilbert—' breaking off to turn aside and wipe her eyes—'your poor old sister does like to see you as you are looking now. She is always ready to be proud of you! But come, you are not finished off yet. Mrs. Jervis is a bride, they tell me. You must go properly adorned. Where is a flower for your button-hole?'

'I want none, Jean. Let me be off. I shall be late.'

'Not till you have a flower. Miss Grey, are those wild rose-buds you are wearing? They are lovely, anyhow. May we rob you of them?'

'No, Jean; no!'

'They are your own,' said Sydney, unfastening them from her dress, 'Davis had clipped them from the orchard hedge. I brought them in so that they should not die entirely neglected;' and she held the delicate cluster out.

Miss Hurst signed at her own disabled fingers.

'I cut them stupidly with my huge scissors. Will you be good enough to pin the flowers safely in? Oh, here comes Flossy for the jackets before they are ready! Gilbert, you have your hat? Now do enjoy yourself; and pray come back in good spirits. I—I—shall wait up for you.'

Flossy was piping forth 'Miss Hurst, in the hall. Flossy and her garments controlled the situation. Away Miss Hurst hurried. Shyly, reluctantly, Sydney took up the miniature nosegay.

'Have I to be decorated then?' Mr. Hurst asked in a low voice, and for answer she fixed the buds in their place with wondrous speed, frightened at—herself.

Hardly a tithe of a minute her hands hovered about him; her soft skirt lay upon his feet. He could almost feel her breathing. Another second he could not have kept master of himself. As thankless as when her song all but unmanned him, Gilbert Hurst took up his hat and went forth to keep his engagement.

'I shall take Flossy home if you will excuse my running away,' said Miss Hurst, looking in some while after; 'oh, I see you are writing. You will be glad to be left.'

Sydney had just caught up her pen, guiltily conscious of an aimless fit of absence. Glad she was to be again left,

but her letter was not finished, not even begun when, an hour later, in the twilight, Miss Hurst returned, nervous, tremulous, delightedly important.

'I have been too long, but I couldn't tear myself away from little Horace. He was crying for his father. Nothing would comfort him but my stopping till he fell asleep. Ah, it makes a woman very happy, Miss Grey, to have children fond of her; even—other people's!'

Then Miss Jean flitted away, smiling as she recalled the child's little warm hold upon her wrist. Presently back she came, suggesting,

'Don't let me keep you up longer than you like, Miss Grey. I want to talk to you very much, but I think it must be to-morrow. Of course I shall sit up for my brother; but you had best not wait.'

'Are you sure the time will not seem

long if you are alone?' Sydney asked, nothing loth though to escape a *tête-à-tête*.

'Oh, not the least. I would rather you went. Which sounds rude, but it only means I am not good company to-night. For—oh, Miss Grey, I must tell you this much—Mr. Babbington wants me to forget all these last years; to marry him now! He told me so three weeks ago. I have been distracted as to what was my duty. I told him yesterday I dare not answer for myself. Gilbert must decide. And he is going to talk to Gilbert as they come home from Perristone. It does agitate me so. You won't mind my saying good-night. I can—oh dear—I can tell you more to-morrow!'

How much more, and what would it be?

Sydney shook loose her heavy braids, wrapped her dark dressing-gown about her

and gathered herself up on the deep window-ledge in her bed-room, to ponder over that. Sore-hearted, jealous, resentful; not for herself. Smarting irrationally for some one else and what the coming hour was bringing him. Mutely she kept vexed vigil, while the outer world, that had sunk into shadow with the falling eve, rewoke to clear untinted shape beneath a full June moon. From beyond the far, dim hills; touching the west woods' crests; down the still, billow-like masses of full foliage; to wreaths of mist about the meadows the silver light had stolen before, through the perfect quiet, voices sounded nearing Wynstone. By the gate some minutes' monologue ensued. Then an interchange of good-nights, and Mr. Hurst re-entered the house to meet Miss Jean.

Well Sydney knew, if arbitration were left to him, what the issue of that con-

ference would be. Acutely, as inarticulate sounds rose from the lower room to her open casement, imagination kept pace with the painful steps Gilbert Hurst must now be treading of self-renunciation to whatever point his sister's happiness demanded. For him, for his future, there was no one to plead: no one by to care! And she, an Alwyn, who ought most of any in the world to have helped him now, could do it less than the veriest stranger in the world. With a bitter flood of tears she buried her face in her hands, and feverishly struggled long to quell the useless torrent. When, throbbing and aching, she raised her head at last, the voices underneath had ceased. A footfall, Miss Jean's, traversed the lobby to the opposite room, and the hush of near midnight settled on the house.

But sleep seemed as far from Sydney's

eyes as if the dawn of another day were nigh; as indeed in some sort it was.

Miss Jean's palpitations had long subsided into slumber, and still Sydney stood at her window, tormented by yearnings, passionate as futile, to furnish Gilbert Hurst, master, instructor to her as he had been, second thus only to Mr. Vaughan, clever as he was, noble and worthy, to furnish him now with some haven from this last storm of homelessness that threatened him.

So earnestly she was thinking, looking starward, a movement below was unheeded. A figure from the house crossed the lawn, passed over the sloping meadow to the curve of the stream beside two drooping willows, then stood, a bare six inches from the foam-fringed, eddying pool. There her eyes suddenly rested on it. Took in the spot, the form. Something more subtle

than instinct showed her the peril of that conjunction, and in that moment's awful fear she knew the truth. Gilbert Hurst's life was dearer to her than her own! Swift as thought, with soundless, slippered feet, she was down the stairs, out from the open window, over the grass, near, near, nearer to him; and not a whit too soon.

Forgive him all who can. Bethink you, any who would condemn, how horribly close to mortal sin most men some time or other of their pilgrimage have been. How the strongest heart has had its hour of sickening weakness. How the lives of well-nigh all mortals know some era when sense and even faith are over-ridden by agony that seems incurable. Such, slow gathering through months, culminated to-night in the hour when any world promised Gilbert Hurst more rest than

this. In the white full light he stood, every pain-racked feature plain, one hand pressed hard upon his mouth. For one beat of the pulse he swayed: another——

'*Wait patiently for Him: and—He shall give thee thy heart's desire.*'

Close to him now, she could not speak. She could not cry to him. Words of her own her lips refused to frame. In that great crisis volition was all quenched. From a source beyond herself those notes, those syllables arose which laid the evil spirit tugging so hard for one more fainting soul. Gilbert Hurst turned, white as death, towards the notes which sounded like an angel's help.

'Why are you here?' he said, hoarsely. 'What brought you?'

'I saw you,' she answered, panting, 'so near the water. I was afraid for you.'

'Afraid for him!' Afraid for him. And

had flown to his side thus, in her innocent bravery. Verily temptation had not done with him yet. He moved a step from the water.

'You need not be afraid for me now,' he said: 'go back,' the cold words so warring with the fires in his breast they rang out rough and harsh.

'Not without you,' said Sydney: speak as he might, she would not leave him thus. 'Mr. Hurst; do come,' she let her hand fall timidly upon his shoulder; which of them was it who was trembling so? 'Do come?' she repeated, and to that sweet imploring, that torture too dear to be denied, he yielded. Her light touch holding him in tender charge, silently they regained the house, a journey brief but never to be forgotten. A fitful night breeze swept her long hair across his hands as they were entering. He started

aside as though the soft tress stung him.

'Go and sleep now, for I am safe enough, Miss Grey,' he said, and strode upstairs.

Alone she noiselessly barred the window, then noiselessly crept back to her own room. But there strength suddenly discarded her. Upon her knees she fell beside her bed. Thence sent one great entreating cry to Heaven.

'Safe! Of Thy mercy keep him safe. My love! My love!'

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GRAND ALLIANCE.

The week bargained for and three days' grace beyond, Mr. Drayton stayed at St. Clairs; long enough for Mary to rub her eyes plenty of times and make quite sure her new-come happiness was no mere dream: long enough for Mr. Vaughan to sun himself in the bright situation with the keen, amused pleasure which almost turns unselfish age to youth again: and long enough for Lady Comyngham to be attracted by the tidings to the Gate-House, there to make congratulations in such sort, as

set Mrs. Dacie's maternal pride in a blaze which has never since subsided.

To this day she relates how the Countess said, 'St. Clairs must not expect to find another Miss Dacie in a hurry, but they must beg her to put young Mrs. Duvesne in training, before she left, and Edward, with his small parish, must help Mr. Vaughan, with his large one, and they must all try and make the bride as little missed as possible!'

A programme which, it is pleasant to record, obtained forthwith, and still remains in excellent working order. Then the bride-groom-expectant went off, on his less agreeable errand and, having run down to overlook what he had in hand at Granfylde, and returned thence to see after his wedding suit in Bond Street, was putting away a Monday afternoon, before starting the same evening for Paris, by a lounge in

the Park, when from the herd of idlers he was unexpectedly accosted by Major Villiers, beside whom was Mr. Rupert, whose acquaintance he had not before had the honour of making.

Both these gentlemen were extremely willing to receive a third party into their conversation.

The honest old Major was sorely hurt, far below the surface, by what he considered his son's currish conduct at The Dale the summer before. This, combined with the young man's breach of promise as to loo and congeners of that seductive pastime, had set up a barrier between father and son; neither was well at ease in the other's company nowadays. By a substratum of selfish sense Mr. Rupert had escaped going to the dogs, but he was imbued with a distaste for the leading-strings of prudence, and, though now living in bounds of moder-

ation and his actual income—for with his biggest asseveration the Major had vowed nevermore to pay a penny of debt for him—he adopted the cynical air of a man to whom the world is a used-up toy, decorum and respectability just tramways into a wished-for abyss of oblivion!

After a few minutes' stroll, 'I have been trying, Mr. Drayton,' said the Major, who, by an effort, was always the cheerier of this pair, 'to make my son spare me a journey the end of this week. He could get away from Friday to Monday, and have a couple of days at Paris if he would agree to it; but'—with a glance at Mr. Rupert, less proud, less confident, than of yore—'I am afraid he won't contrive to oblige me.'

'It is the sort of thing I don't care for, sir,' answered the younger man, with his chin in the air, and a tone declaring him

bored with the subject. 'The channel always turns me bilious, and I would rather not go.'

'Paris!' said Richard Drayton. 'Why, that is where I'm bound to-night. When do you go, Major Villiers?'

'On Thursday, if go I must. We've a summons from Mrs. Alwyn to her daughter's wedding on Saturday. I suppose I have to give the young lady away.'

'Mrs. Alwyn's daughter! You mean the elder? You don't mean——'

'Yes, yes, the elder. Not Sydney—Miss Alwyn,' put in the Major, with a quick look at his son, who pretended not to hear what was being talked of; 'it is my own niece, Leonora, who I'm given to understand is making a grand match at last. But I wish they had not dragged me over for it. Suppose, Mr. Drayton, you go to them, with my compliments, and say *you'll* be deputy for me!'

'When they would send me back with anything but compliments,' was the laughing answer. 'No, I must decline such a delicate embassy!'

'Ah, you've no taste for these affairs either!' sighed the Major. 'So I must e'en pack up my coat and show up myself, I'm afraid.'

'That you must, sir. Though,'—with a meaning twinkle—'I am not at all above taking an interest in such things. In fact I'm going to take a very strong interest in one somewhere about the end of this month.'

'You don't say so!' cried the Major. 'What have I come on now? Why, who's the lady?'

'Some one you know, sir. I have to fetch her from St. Clairs.' Mr. Rupert deigned to look round at this. 'It is Miss Dacie.'

'Hey-day, sit down and tell us all about it,' said the Major, with a clutch at some vacant chairs. 'I'm heartily glad to hear again about that friend of—about Miss Dacie. When was it settled? And when does it come off?'

These and sundry more questions Richard Drayton freely answered the much interested inquirer, Mr. Villiers sitting meanwhile a few paces off, consuming cigarettes with an aspect of total indifference. For finale the cause of his expedition to Paris was explained, which his hearer, with many an interpolated 'scamp' and 'scoundrel,' was getting vastly excited over, when a passer-by with friendly greeting claimed 'old Villiers,' and for a couple of minutes Richard Drayton was left to Mr. Rupert only. By way of civilly saying something, he handed the young man a commonly executed 'Carte de

visite,' remarking, 'People should not leave these tell-tales behind them. If I had not picked this up by accident at Granfylde, I should never have been able to track out the original, whom I have been telling your father of.'

The photograph was of a young man with marked features, gazing not straightforward but sideways from the picture. Mr. Rupert took it carelessly, but at the first glimpse his expression changed. With an ejaculation he flung away his cigarette, then wheeled his chair closer to Mr. Drayton. 'I really have not been attending,' he said, 'but is this a friend of yours?'

'Friend? No! Enemy rather.'

'So much the better for you.'

'Why? You know nothing of him, do you?'

'Once upon a time I did. A little.

And I knew him for a rascal. You say you intend to find him for something or other?'

'Yes. To settle scores with him.'

'Ah, lucky to be able! Wish I'd the same chance, Mr. Drayton. But if you meet your gentleman you may find it useful to be able to tell him—' looking askance to see his father was out of hearing —'that one of the parties he played with at "little St. James," (he'll know where you mean!) on the first of May two years ago, understands about his *King of Hearts* well enough now. In plain English, you may tell him he is a card-sharper and a blackleg, and men in a livery he doesn't love will receive him with open arms if ever he sets foot in London again!'

'And may I mention who says this?'

'He'll be none the wiser. I cannot even tell you what he was called, though I

should know his face among a thousand. We met in a company known only to each other, sooner or later, by two names, fools and rogues. He belonged to the last. I had the slight superiority of belonging to the first class. You perceive—' the liveliness imparted by the notion of a blow at his old associate giving place to his former drawling lassitude—' I reveal the secrets of my unregenerate days, Mr. Drayton: now *nous avons changé tout cela*, and I'm never going to be naughty no more! Sh!' Mr. Rupert applied himself to another cigarette and nursing one knee, as the Major returned to his place, and taking up the thread of his interrupted dialogue remarked regretfully:—

' What a pity, Mr. Drayton, your prosperity did not come a year ago, when Miss Dacie's friend, poor Sydney, could have shared its pleasures.'

'Just the one drawback we both deplore,' said the other man, heartily. 'But we don't mean to let it last a day longer than we can help. Mary—Miss Dacie—has written to her through the mother, as usual. If she won't give us leave to go and see her, we mean to attack Mrs. Alwyn for permission. We think we know why she is banished. Now, we mean to know where it's to.'

Then he repeated the Countess's conjectures, and asked point-blank if they were correct.

'Why, to be sure they are!' answered the Major, uncommonly relieved that the murder was out, 'and, as this has got wind just as I said it would, I shall urge my sister-in-law to take off her preposterous veto on the poor child corresponding frankly with us all. If I knew where she was stowed away I should be tempted to let it

out now. But I don't. For—' with a vexed frown, which Richard Drayton fancied he could interpret anent Mr. Rupert, 'she will have nothing to do with me now! But, if you should chance on Mrs. Alwyn over yonder, ask her about Sydney yourself!'

'Small likelihood of that,' returned Richard Drayton, 'my business will not carry me into ladies' company. But such as it is I must be off after it. I've only time to get my portmanteau from the "Langham" and catch the seven-twenty train from Victoria;' and with genial farewell from the Major and a bow from Mr. Villiers, who was talking now to some ladies at a little distance, he was soon out of the Park, and *en route* for his first stage towards searching out his old slanderer among the slums of Paris.

There at least, assuming that like seeks

like, he was prepared to find Mr. 'Thompson,' as the gentleman appeared to have been known at Granfylde, or 'Thomas Travers,' as he styled himself at San Nicolas: but, Tuesday having been spent fruitlessly among such haunts as he had been privately directed to, he was fain next day to take the advice proffered by the courteous manager at Meurice's, and invoke the aid of the French police. A morning visit to the office of one of the *chefs* in the Boulevard du Palais had the effect of clearing the lines. Mr. Travers was perfectly well-known in Paris, under yet another alias. He was the moving spirit of a gang for whom the law was on the alert. His movements were watched with much solicitude.

'You will probably find him, Monsieur,' said the polite functionary to his inquirer, speaking English so fluently that the con-

versation, to Richard Drayton's unaffected relief, was carried on in that tongue, 'on the Sunday evening at a certain gaming-table in the Rue Beaubourgh or—you desire him sooner?—then any morning at his recently engaged *appartement* on the Boulevard de Malesherbes, or in the earlier evening at Nombre dix-huit, Avenue Bois de Boulogne, where he spends now much time. He is clever, very, this your compatriot. He evades us yet. But if you will his detention under this,' touching documents just shown him, 'you shall be immediately accompanied to that purpose.'

Richard Drayton deliberated. Once his own was name cleared, he hardly desired to push the man to this extremity. He would give him another chance. Try other means first. Thanking the civil official, then, and arranging for further communication, if

needful, he bent his course towards the well-known Boulevard de Malesherbes, and requested of the *concièrge* at one of its best appointed dwellings an interview with Mr. Thompson under his latest Parisian pseudonym.

But 'M'sieur was not within. He had but arisen to set forth and make visits. The hour of his return was totally uncertain.'

On, therefore, to the Avenue Bois de Boulogne went Mr. Drayton, trusting, though with some wonderment, to come, in that well-inhabited locality, upon his gentleman with his intimates for the time being.

But at number eighteen he was also too late. An active-minded attendant was 'bien chagriné, but le Monsieur Anglaise was but just departed to drive with his friends to Longchamps. He would be

returned only at the hour to dine in the evening.'

Allowing seven as the 'hour to dine,' Richard Drayton put away the time impatiently till eight, then presented himself once more at the balconied, flower-garnished little mansion, requested to be announced merely as a gentleman from England, and speculating much on what species of company he was entering, found himself, after traversing a spacious gilded corridor, in a brilliant decorated salon, and in the presence of Mrs. Alwyn, Miss Villiers, and Mr. Morecoombe-Wood!

The ladies were in charming, costly evening toilette. Mrs. Alwyn's satin draperies enveloped her velvet *fauteuil,* Leonora in pearly silk and muslin, with a semi-curass of myosotis, was looking up with rapt attention at her masculine companion. He, in immalculate dinner

costume, seemed whispering soft speeches for her ear alone. All three showed visible amazement—no fraction greater than what he felt!—at Richard Drayton's appearance. In one of the trio a flash of something like fear showed at the back of this surprise.

'This is an unexpected—call,' said Mrs. Alwyn, rising, ceremonious interrogation in her aspect. 'You bring no ill news, I trust.

'Oh, certainly not. At least—that is, course not!' returned Mr. Drayton, shaking hands with herself and her daughter, then coming to a most awkward full-stop before their guest, during which thought Mrs. Alwyn rapidly, 'This man has found Sydney out. He wants to marry her. That is why she refused to come here to me. If he hopes for one *sous* of dower, he will find himself disappointed!' Aloud she said,

'You do not know our companion. Allow me to introduce——'

'Excuse me,' the caller interrupted, 'I do know Mr.—Wood—Morecoombe—er—' (Among the aliases he grew confused. 'Mr. Morecoombe-Wood,' corrected Mrs. Alwyne, her eyebrows contracting at this *gaucherie.*)—'perfectly well. To be candid, it is for him my visit is intended. I must plead guilty to never having suspected it would bring me into your society.'

Mrs. Alwyn drew her mouth into surprised lines, sank back with dignity, and made a gesture implying, 'then proceed with your business, pray!' Miss Villiers, with a scarcely concealed pout, gave a glance of pettish offence at the intruder. But Mr. Morecoombe-Wood took a seat doggedly by the fair Leonora, and from that shelter met Mr. Drayton's eye with a stare of steady defiance.

'Before ladies you will excuse me from entering on any discussion that may have brought you here,' he said. 'It is not exactly the form we follow in Paris!'

'As you will,' answered Richard Drayton. 'But having come thus far to meet you, and being in haste to get back to England, perhaps Mrs. Alwyn will permit me to wait here until you can spare me five minutes;' and he took a chair close to the door, sitting there through a minute of embarrassment to all, broken by his hostess asking if he was particularly occupied in England, that he must return thither quickly from this enchanting city.

'I fear, Mrs. Alwyn, I don't find Paris half so enchanting as the village you left,' was the blunt reply to this. 'At any rate it is to St. Clairs I have gone to look for a wife!'

'And found one!' cried the lady, suspicion aflame again.

'And found her.'

'Actually in that remote corner of the earth,' said Leonora, pityingly. The French capital was her Paradise. St. Clairs in reminiscence—well, exactly the reverse! 'You must be easily contented, Mr. Drayton!'

'Indeed I am not. I could find no match to Miss Dacie elsewhere, I assure you. For I have followed Dr. Primrose's advice, and chosen my wife as she would choose her gown, to wear well!'

'Miss Da—cie!' repeated Leonora, with an inflection of amused patronage: 'Actually to be married! And you say Dr. Primrose advised it? Is he a medical man you both know, then?'

Mrs. Alwyn tapped the floor impatiently. Sometimes her dearest Leonora was

provokingly stupid. She was so now. What would that well read Mr. Morecoombe-Wood think? She need not have disturbed herself. The well-read gentleman had enough else to think of in those seconds, to let his fair lady's pretty ignorance pass unheeded.

'Drayton,' he said, getting up armed with a resolution to take the bull by the horns; 'Mrs. Alwyn will permit us the use of her *salle-à-manger*, I am sure. We had best dispose of what brings you here at once.' Richard Drayton was on his feet instantly, still in front of the door. Unearthing his quarry where he had, put him in a bit of a daze, but one idea he kept well in sight. Having found the fellow, he must not let him go till what he wanted was secured.

'We can dispose of it without so much as leaving the room,' he answered, 'Mrs.

Alwyn giving us leave to talk ten minutes by yonder writing-table.'

'My room is at your service, Mr. Morecoombe-Wood,' said the lady; 'Leonora, love,' as the two men moved off the length of the apartment, 'read me Galignani's London letter, will you?' And to that distant accompaniment Leonora's lover wound up accounts with him whom he had nearly made his scape-goat years before.

His cavalier air changed to one of lynx-like anxiety, he watched while, without a single word, letters from one Senor Josè de Souza of San Nicolas, detailing certain sums unlawfully abstracted from his possession by a Francis Travers, a telegraphed order for the arrest of this Travers if necessary, and a second telegram giving entire power to deal with the matter to Richard Drayton, were laid before him.

His quick wit caught at the saving clause.

'If necessary.' He put his finger on the syllables. 'What buys me off?' he asked, in the lowest audible voice.

'This,' replied Richard Drayton, unfolding a sheet of letter-paper, on which was set forth clearly a recantation of the tissue of lies told by Francis Travers, to stain his colleague's character at their Brazilian post.

'At this distance of time and place: for sums insignificant to him, Senor de Souza has no special desire to prosecute you——'

'Chut! Chut!—'

'If I am contented, so will he be.'

'Give me a pen!' whispered Mr. Morecoombe-Wood, with the harsh, hard breathing of a man at bay. 'There!' seizing a

slender, gilded toy of Leonora's, and dashing off a shaky 'Francis Travers,' 'that's soon done, and, upon my honour,' (an oath with poor enough backbone) 'I'm glad to do it, Drayton. You can't tell what I was put to out with the De Souzas. But I've often felt in an awfully low way over it. I never did a trick of the sort before or since. You are satisfied? You'll go now? You won't let out upon a fellow?' This in rapid, feverishly-eager undertone, his evil, calculating face well kept from the ladies' sight. 'You'll cry quits if you're as generous as you used to be!'

Even with his precious draft safe, Richard Drayton hesitated, knowing the man a liar, whose mere acquaintance boded ill to Mrs. Alwyn and her daughter. While he demurred, Miss Villiers flung down her paper, crying out:

'Oh, Travers, Travers! A horrible bee is on my arm! It will sting me. Oh, here, here, what shall I do!'

'Confound—the bee!' said Mr. Morecoombe-Wood, *sotto voce;* but he had to go to her assistance, while Mrs. Alwyn, sailing down on Mr. Drayton, made motherly excuse for the familiar appeal.

'If you had been a few days later you would have missed finding your friend with us. On Saturday my dear daughter changes her name and the gentleman beside her becomes my son-in-law. I think you once said you had a little place in the south of England. Perhaps you know other members of his family and the beautiful place they own in Devonshire?'

Then Richard Drayton made up his mind what to do. Leonora's flutterings were calming down. He went up to the man beside her. 'After all,' said he, curb-

ing a strong inclination to kick this cozener, 'there is something else I must speak of to you. Suppose we step out together for half-an-hour?'

'Oh, tiresome!' murmured Leonora to her pale *fiancé*.

'One minute only, *chèrie!*' he answered, in the same tone, stooping to lift her white hand to his moustache; then the two went out in the lobby together, and in one man's scowl of contemptuous disgust the other saw his game was up.

'Jean! My hat! My gloves! Ah, the lazy beggar is not here! I must wait upon myself. Excuse me.' And with that he dived with snake-like rapidity into an unlighted passage, whence for nigh five minutes his companion impatiently awaited his return. No sign of him then. Richard Drayton followed in the same direction; went through baize-

covered doors, down a long corridor ending with a second staircase, up which came Jean, humming gaily. Then it all flashed on him. Number eighteen was a double house; a corner house. By the side entrance the bird had flown. 'Monsieur Morecoombe-Wood? Oh, he was set out since many minutes—rapidly! Would monsieur return to Madame Alvyne?' asked Jean, and to his excessive mortification Mr. Drayton felt that was the only thing he could do.

Ushered again to her *salon*, the lady was doubly surprised to receive him alone. Tenfold more when he begged a private interview, and—Leonora in bewildered annoyance, having swept away through folding doors, to throw herself on a couch in the next room, and listen attentively to every sentence uttered in the one she had left—beyond expression startled at what he had then to say.

'Am I satisfied with the marriage projected for my daughter?' Thus he broke the ice. 'Of course I am, Mr. Drayton! Mr. Morecoombe-Wood is a gentleman of property, of leisure, of undeniable position, of excellent birth. His family is irreproachable. He is a baron; Hanoverian, Bavarian: I am not sure which. Count Küster, his closest friend, has visited us here. He cannot speak too highly of him. My daughter stays with Count Küster's circle through the winter Berlin season. I do trust—' faltering angrily before Mr. Drayton's pitying expression, 'you are not come to me with any annoying hearsay. Slander floats in Paris as well as in other places. But I have no desire to hear any of Mr. Morecoombe-Wood!'

'My dear madam,' was the reply, 'I wish fervently I had no worse than slander to report. Try your utmost not to be

upset. But there is no time to lose. The truth must out, come what may. I am bound to tell you this man you have received as "Morecoombe-Wood" is just plain Francis Thompson: a fraudulent clerk in England: a thief in his employment in Brazil: a card-sharper noted in a dozen cities: an unmitigated scoundrel under all conditions. You have but one thing to be thankful for in your connection with him. That is, that you have probably seen the last of him.'

'The—last—of him!' gasped Mrs. Alwyn, her cheeks shrivelling with anger and fright beneath their coating of cosmetics, 'Mr. Drayton, this is not true! I—you—he shall confront you! He shall disprove this! Take me, take me to him! How can I, how can my child, know peace till we find this false!' And with frenzied weeping and fright, powder and rouge

rubbed off, leaving a woman grotesquely aged and faded, Mrs. Alwyn demanded a carriage to take her and Mr. Morecoombe-Wood's culumniator to the Boulevard des Malesherbes, there to win denial for these most abominable accusations!

Poor lady, the miserable drive had a yet more miserable end. The swindler, never unprepared, had got the start of them. From his elegant *appartement* hired, not as he had assured them for the year, but for one month only, the *concièrge* told them; furnished not from his purse but from his landlord's, Monsieur had but a short quarter of an hour before removed many personal belongings, 'summoned to Bordeaux!' And not his belongings only were missing.

'Where,' cried Mrs. Alwyn, 'are the cases of china, sent here direct from England? They were to be ready when

my daughter came. We were to have a frieze of "Spode," Mr. Drayton, worth a hundred guineas! There was Wedgewood too. And a piece of Faïence de Henri Deux! Priceless! Where is it? Where is my daughter's trousseau? Half had been sent here. They were to have come on Saturday themselves. There was lace! There were jewels! Mr. Drayton, Mr. Drayton, I am losing my senses! What am I to do! What *am* I to do!'

Difficult, this, to answer.

Between the wrath of the unpaid *concièrge*, the lady's ravings, and his own imperfect command of French, Richard Drayton had a distracting night of it. Back at the Avenue Bois de Boulogne, sounds reached the *salon*, where he was left awhile, of Leonora bewailing, upbraiding, blaming: her mother fondling,

soothing, scolding, retorting: both finding their one consolation in casting the onus of this catastrophe upon each other: a deplorable duet, lasting till long after midnight.

Then, tortured and dishevelled, the elder lady appeared again, revealing a yet more serious cause for her violent agitation.

'Mr. Drayton, if this horrible nightmare be true, where is the—man? He must be found: detained; for he has grossly robbed me!'

'If your loss be bearable, I would almost counsel your putting up with it for the sake of your daughter. If you move the law against him you, will only have to suffer painful publicity, and he owns nothing but ill-gotten gains at cards. Nothing can be recovered of him.'

'But it must! It shall!' half-shrieked Mrs. Alwyn, and then divulged the further

fact that besides smaller sums lent him, 'just till his dividends came in,' and for furniture which he represented himself as purchasing, the sharper had actually inveigled his dupe into taking her daughter's portion—half her entire remaining fortune—from the English funds and placing it in a 'compagnie,' of which he was a managing director! This worthless scrip she now showed with trembling eagerness, only to have her worst fears confirmed. In fatuous credulity she had been befooled of five thousand pounds, and Richard Drayton dared hold out no hope of recovering one farthing!

He went by daybreak to set the police astir, Mrs. Alwyn insisting on that course, the result of which was the discovery some four-and-twenty hours later, that the swindler, in flaxen wig, and yet another alias, had got safely off from Havre, and

set sail for an American port. Whether he had meant to carry out the marriage on the ensuing Saturday, and so wrong his victims yet more heavily, conld never now be known.

Major Villiers, stopped by telegram from coming over, so strongly urged by letter their making the best of a bad business, that all idea of legal retribution was discarded. At the end of the week Mr. Drayton left the bitterly distressed ladies preparing to give Paris a wide berth, as soon as they should be fit to travel. Then, remembering it for the first time in all this hurly-burly, he ventured the suggestion that the presence of Mrs. Alwyn's youngest child might be some comfort now. Might he, or might Miss Dacie, send Miss Sydney to her?

But the mother answered with concentrated irritation.

'Most certainly not. My daughter has chosen to strip herself of all that might have helped us. Now, therefore, less than ever can I condone her wilfulness or suffer her return!' And seeing she was too angry and too actually ill to be reasoned with, Mr. Drayton had to take back to England this unsatisfactory reply as the corner-stone of his—in so many ways—most unsatisfactory expedition.

CHAPTER IX.

MISS HURST ARRANGES EVERYTHING FOR EVERYONE.

When Sydney woke after that strange night of over-wrought emotions the sun, high in the heavens, and sounds about the house, told her usual rising hour long past.

As she fully roused to realisation of what crimsoned her cheeks and smote her with a pain she could not have parted from for worlds, a light tap sounded at the door and Miss Jean's head was cautiously intruded.

'Oh, awake this time!' she exclaimed, advancing cheerfully. 'I looked in twice before, but I wouldn't allow Fanny to disturb you. "No, Fanny," I said. "When people sleep so heavily, it is a sign they require it;" though if I reasoned like that for myself I should rarely be up before noon. I am sure the birds were twittering and it was getting quite dawn to-day before I had had a single doze!'

This was a general delusion of Miss Jean's, a harmless hallucination, never gainsaid in her household. But this morning the martyr-like boast carried with it singular dread. Nervously determining to hear the worst at once, Sydney lifted her head to ask, 'Did anything disturb you then so very much last night?' And the suave self-delusion of the reply—'Oh, nothing fresh! Only, as you may imagine, after such an agitating talk with my poor

brother I was not able to close my eyes for hours!'—was a relief beyond expression. The new mystery of her own life, ineffable folly, sweet, miserable as it might be, she could keep safe from outside cognisance. To have had the other phase of the late hours' brief drama suspected, known, would have been terrible. Miss Jean's shocked investigations, their inevitable sequence, Mr. Babbington's officially scandalised upbraidings, these Mr. Hurst was spared. Immeasurably grateful she felt that this was so.

While Sydney rapidly thought, Miss Jean chattered on: wondered Miss Grey could sleep with undrawn curtains; it was bad for her eyes; she always told Gilbert it was bad for his. Yes, she never neglected any trifle that might give him a chance, poor fellow, though long since she had lost all hope for him. She quite imagined he

had done as much for himself, but going off as he had this morning to Dr. Legh, showed her mistaken.

'Gone!' Sydney echoed, sitting up, her fears for him all starting to the fore again. 'When? Had Mr. Hurst left Wynstone that morning?'

'Good gracious!' cried Miss Hurst. 'Do you sleep in a dressing-gown, Miss Grey! Haven't you sufficient blankets? Would you like cousin Priscilla's knitted quilt? Why didn't you tell me you were cold?'

'I am not, indeed,' Sydney stammered, 'only—my head ached. I fell asleep with this on. And you said—Mr. Hurst—?'

'—Is gone to the same place he was coming from when you met him last July. To James Legh's, an old friend of our family. He told poor Gilbert last year if anything could ever benefit him it would be total cessation from work, absolute

freedom from anxiety; and *that* I know he has had.

'"Try those," said Dr. Legh, "and come again next summer:" so he is gone, much to my surprise. I thought he had given up the notion, but this morning it appeared to have taken hold of him, so I would not vex him by saying "no" to it: I merely remarked, "I'm afraid it's a waste of money, Gilbert dear, and with quarter-day near, I am short, as usual; nevertheless, here are two sovereigns, and I know you'll give me any change you bring back." But really, Miss Grey, you look as if you had a headache: how glad you will be of a quiet day with me alone. While you are getting up, I'll go down and make you some strong tea. You'll enjoy that!' and with a pleasant glow of self-appreciation off trotted Miss Hurst.

In half-an-hour Sydney descended too:

the stairs, the hall, the very sunshine, all looking strange, as if she had had some illness since noticing them last. The gleaming river beyond the garden set her shuddering. The house seemed curiously, eloquently empty. The absence of one pervaded every room, every minute.

At the end of the breakfast-table Miss Hurst sorted and dusted sundry inherited treasures of crockery. While Sydney made the best feint of a meal she could, the industrious lady proceeded with her Crown Derby, explaining:—

'I take the opportunity of doing this while Gilbert is away. I am so careful not to hurt his feelings; I always try to avoid saying, "Mind where you are going, or what you are doing;" and I'm sure the way he moves about is extraordinary; but I tell him prevention is better than cure, so I put cups and saucers like these

out of his reach, for he would be sorry to do me an injury in anything, little or large, as I'm sure he proved last night.' Then, after a halt full of self-consciousness, 'You would like to hear how I got on with him, Miss Grey?'

'Y—es. If you don't think Mr. Hurst will mind your telling me.'

'Why should he? If I choose to confide in anyone, what need stop me? Mr. —Mr.—oh, dear,' with quite a juvenile simper, 'I must say "Horatius," is gone to Hereford till this evening, and I am not one who can keep my pleasures to myself. That is,' with a tinge of offence at her grand disclosure not being more eagerly met, 'if you care to hear of them, Miss Grey.'

'I really do. My head makes me seem stupid. Please go on.'

'Ah, the sun glares through the win-

dow. I'll let the blind down, then the pain will pass off. There!' suiting the action to the word and reshelving her precious china as she talked: 'Well, you can imagine how nervous I got waiting for Gilbert last night. I could have sunk into the ground when I heard him and—and Horatius at the gate. I couldn't think what to say or how to say it, but Horatius'—that bewitching name was an apple of gold to Miss Jean's tongue!—'had been so good. He had entered into every particular with Gilbert. There was nothing for me to explain except'—with appropriate confusion—'how truly I am still attached to Horatius.' A little pause. Then: 'My poor brother! You see he has been accustomed to consider himself everything to me. I am afraid it came as a blow upon him. He looked so odd, so

pale when he came in. But I impressed on him that a wife's affection is quite different to a sister's. That I can expand to the one without robbing him of the other; and that though—or even because—he may never know a wife's, he shall never, never lose a sister's! And I told him, if he thought me wicked or foolish or unfair to him to marry, just to say so candidly, and I would see if I could endeavour to give it up, though of course it would break poor Horatius's heart, and mine, and ruin the poor motherless little children's prospects for ever! And when he said my happiness was the first thing, and, if marrying Mr. Babbington secured that, I must put him out of the question altogether, I said "no," nothing on earth shall make me do so! And if he could agree to neither of our plans which Hora-

tius named to him, why still, as long as I lived, he should always have a corner in my home.'

'Plans,' Sydney, with expectation ordered to numbness, put in. 'What were the plans, Miss Hurst?'

'Well, mine that Gilbert should become a clergyman. Yes, indeed! I could teach him the prayers by heart myself. An undertaking, but for him I would attempt it. Horatius would attend to his views. I haven't a doubt Horatius could make him orthodox, though,' with fine inconsequential confusion, 'I don't think he can be so much amiss, in spite of his not liking to argue on theology. But he is a most honourable man, and I'm sure no one could ever say a word against his character, and he has a good voice, and poor people always get attached to him.

Davis is, Taffy was, so the Church is the very thing for him ?'

'And he decides—?' Sydney asked, Miss Hurst leaving off for breath.

'Nothing yet. He hardly said a word. And I begged him to understand I had no intention of driving him into work. "Of course," I said, "dear Gilbert, if you just live with—us, you will make—er—our children your companions. They are backward now, but in a year's time Belle will be able to read to you. And you wouldn't expect me to go on paying Miss Grey to stop here, when there will be plenty of us to attend to you, and my poor little income will be wanted in fifty new ways.'

A tremor of that coming separation turned Sydney cold.

'It is reasonable,' she said, shrinking

from her own words, 'that I should leave you.'

Miss Hurst had strayed on awkward ground. In her own embarrassment she overlooked Sydney's emotion.

'You and I will settle that by and by. But I was bound to just name it to my brother. And, dear Miss Grey, now don't mind this, but I said too that I thought for your own self it would be a good thing for you to leave us.'

The blood rushed tingling over Sydney's face. Was her secret an open one? What had Miss Hurst guessed? What had she told her brother?

'A good thing for me to leave!' She faltered: 'but—why?'

Miss Hurst had finished her china. Now she drew her chair close to her startled companion, and patting her arm, said with genuine kindliness:—

'Because, my dear, if I may call you so, —for Miss Grey sounds stiff, and whether you are Susan, or Sarah, or Sybil, you've never told us—because I really do not think this is the place for you. As Horatius himself said, being interested, you know, in everyone I like, a lady so young and nice-looking ought hardly to have been put in such a post. I was conscious of it from the beginning. But I never spoke of your age or your appearance to my brother, They have been alluded to before him, but such remarks seemed simply to go in at one ear and out at the other. So I am free from trouble on that score. But other people make comments. Mrs. Preece has done so. And I think, and Horatius thinks, that another home would be more suitable for you. Besides——'

'Well: besides?' said Sydney, slowly.

'Why, I must drop concealment, and

say to you as I did to my brother last night, that I feel confident—yes, quite, —that you have some matrimonial project which may be brought to a happy crisis by your quitting us. Now, don't be offended,' —as Sydney started violently—'I will be quite frank. I have put things together which you have said, and so on, the weekly letter you are so particular over, and the one that comes for you—"the gentleman's letters," as that inquisitive-eyed Fanny called them, though I've never seen even the address of one—and I can quite see you have had disagreement with your family. But,'—with a gust of romantic fervour—'you and your lover have been constant! So let me just write to this mother and sister of yours, "travelling in France," you know, and tell them that you've earned a right to be rewarded! It's not that I want to lose you. If I had the means we lost really

through that wretched Mr. Alwyn, why, I would say, "Stop, Miss Grey!" Some one I am told, has paid that unfortunate man's actual creditors after all. But we have no legal claim. No one thinks of our moral one. So we must go injured to the end of our days, and so must others, indirectly, even you! But, as I said to Gilbert, "it is my firm trust that Miss Grey in leaving us will gain her due. A home and a husband such as she is fit for." Now, my dear, have I not guessed right?'

Over this excellent intentioned labyrinth of words Sydney turned dizzy. What to set right, what to leave unexplained, she could not sift out. Deeply reddening, then chill and pale, she was able only to thank Miss Jean disjointedly for her expressed interest, interrupted by a brisk 'Don't say a word about that. Our obligations are equal. As I insisted on to Gil-

bert. He was naturally taken up with my prospects, and appeared to pay no attention to yours; kept walking at the other end of the room and didn't answer once till I said, "Really, Gilbert, you *ought* to wish Miss Grey prosperity in marriage or anything else! Don't let me have to tell her you care nothing for her going or staying!" Then he said'—(Sydney sat motionless: but with hands so tightly locked her father's small seal ring cut deeply into the finger it encircled.)—"I certainly care for Miss Grey's well-doing. I have regretted her being here for months past. She should be freed from us immediately." No more breakfast?'—Sydney had risen and had moved away.—'Well, I am to fetch the dear children to lunch and must be going for them. Take a day or two to determine what you wish. And ask me to

do anything you can think of for your advantage!'

So ended Sydney's last lengthy conclave with Miss Hurst. For during her remaining days at Wynstone if the elated fiancée was not holding charmed converse with Mr. Babbington, Florry's frocks or Horry's food or Bella's boots or some willingly antedated duty demanded her time, and Sydney was left weary leisure in which to chafe her spirit more and more sorely. Miserably useless encumbrance, despite all her cravings to serve them, no matter how cruel the wrench, one hour she longed to be away; another, the prospects of him, who, all uncaring, had drawn forth her love never to be given back, the foresight of his isolation, sympathy only too poignant with that nigh fatal acme of his desolate sorrow, and leaving him seemed impossible. But very soon decision was imperative.

'My brother's friend is not to be put off!' Miss Jean announced the third morning of Mr. Hurst's absence. 'Of course I open Gilbert's letters. Here is one from that Mr. Drayton, and he means to look round, as he calls it, the end of this month or the beginning of next. He wishes for no answer. May not be at home to receive it. Which is all very well, but how does he know if I can receive him! There are the rooms——'

Sydney gathered up her resolution! She would be gone before Richard Drayton came.

'My holiday was to have been asked for soon,' she said. 'Of course now you will not want me back after it. Let me leave directly. I will write to—to—where I shall stay, and you will have room enough then for your guest.'

And to this Miss Jean, inclined to be

provoked at her continued reticence, agreed somewhat stiffly, and Sydney took the initial step towards departing, by writing briefly to Jacob Cheene that in one week's time she would be with him at Still-cote-Upton.

CHAPTER X.

'FAREWELL.'

THE next day Mr. Hurst came home.

Sydney saw him nearing Wynstone, very erect but surely aged, with a face that looked storm-beaten since that evening he had gone out to Perristone wearing her badge of wild white rosebuds. His footstep past the poplars, his voice in the hall, set all her pulses springing with delight that refused to be gainsaid, but sight of the steadily-forced smile with which he entered, sound of his greeting words to her subdued or cold, made her gladly escape, with eyelids smarting over unshed

tears, while Miss Jean poured forth enquiries anent his visit.

'Just as I said!' was her discouraging report when a few minutes later she followed Sydney upstairs. 'The case hopeless, as I knew it to be. Poor Gilbert has only flung thirty shillings away to hear what I could have told him as well. Those thirty shillings would have come in handy, but it can't be helped. As I told him in all kindness, it may be many a day before I have another one pound ten to spare him for an outing, so I do hope, once he got over Dr. Legh's ultimatum, he managed to get a little enjoyment out of this one!'

'In all kindness,' was poor Miss Jean's battle phrase just now, used with implicit belief that it represented her relationships with her brother. 'In all kindness,' she fired off speeches in his hearing as to the multitudinous expenses soon coming on

her, and the blessing of work to people who could brace themselves to it: 'in all kindness,' she encouraged her soon-to-be step-family about the house at all hours, for 'dear Gilbert' to grow used to them before their final removal thither: and 'in all kindness,' she affectionately so contrived to fill the situation with stings and barbs that each day found Sydney more hopelessly heartsick over this, the last turn of fickle Fortune's wheel.

Mr. Hurst she saw seldom. Her speedy going was spoken of before him often. Himself he never named it. The few words he addressed voluntarily to her were marked by extremest reserve. The subject neither could desire to approach seemed to have raised an impassable bar between them. The happier ease of late months became a lost Eden, and every minute Sydney stayed at Wynstone was freighted with fresh pain.

But the very minutes were counted now, for it was the noon she was to leave. To satisfy Miss Jean's anxious hospitality she had swallowed some of her last luncheon; had declined a supply of comestibles for the journey.

'Then you are not going far?' queried her hostess.

'Not far, to-day,' was her answer, registered as 'uncommunicative as usual!' and then Miss Hurst was seized with the fear that Davis, who should by now have come for Sydney's luggage, had mistaken the hour and might not come at all. She must run down and see after him. She would only be five minutes. Meanwhile Miss Grey could take leave of her brother and be ready to start when she came back.

Outside the study door Sydney stood with nerves all quivering; knocked and

went softly in; looked from flower buds clustering about the long casement and books she had now done with, to the one figure shut out from all, though in their midst, with the unsyllabled yearning of a last farewell.

Mr. Hurst knew what brought her there. He was ready with what to do and say. As the door fell back, latched by a west breeze, he got up from some letter he was slowly writing and spoke first, the table's breadth between them.

'You leave us now,' he said, 'but I have something here for you to read before you do so;' passing across a business-like missive.

Sydney took it; read it. A short acceptance of his book. An offered payment, small, as the work was a first one, but a suggestion that a more copious volume on

the same lines would be worth a larger sum. 'An opening at last,' thought Sydney, bitterly, 'and she must not help him to use it!'

'It reads like irony, does it not, Miss Grey?' was Mr. Hurst's comment, as if he saw what passed within her breast. 'Still, this lifts me out of a beggar's estate! For that release I have to thank you. This will take me from Capel Moor without further encroachments on my sister; so again I thank you.'

'You too are going?'

'Yes. To find my level among others as sightless as myself. I am to make one of Mr. Montague Carle's household. To learn, and to teach, and to get my daily bread under his orders. Mr. Babbington suggests this scheme; my sister desires it.'

'And you——'

'I accept it. It is means to the only human end my life may know. My sister's relief. I thank God for that.'

To Mr. Montague Carle's! Under his roof; his rule, hard, grasping, grinding, vulgar, intolerable! Sydney glowed, trembled in angry revolt.

'You can never go there,' she cried, passionately, 'it is cruel——'

'No, no! They see no cruelty in it. Like me, they see the necessity.'

'But'—fighting this fact—'Miss Hurst spoke to me of something else for you.'

'Ah. To undertake, maimed as I am, for loaves and fishes, what I never counted myself fit for in more capable days. No. This is better than that. I had a friend once, Miss Grey, a Robert Vaughan, who always held that solace of some sort lies at the end of the road called straight, however narrow, however rough it might be.'

(Sydney's eyes filled fast. Heaven send he might so find it!) 'There was'—very slowly—'an hour when I forgot this. Henceforth I must forget it no more. When Jean in her great, sisterly goodness willed to keep me with her—idle—I yielded; for I had no right to risk money of hers in seeking advantage for myself I might never secure. That way was narrow enough, but peaceful too. Now things are altered. Brighter times seem come for Jean. It would be unjust for me to mar them. So I turn out—late, not unready—on the rough way.'

(No calm could hide how he was suffering. Her tears fell quick and silent. Oh, to comfort him! To comfort him!) 'I would not have tired you with so much about myself'—he had to be very careful of each word now—'only I would fain have my—helper—of so many months

remember me fairly. At least as no worse than I am.' He broke off abruptly. Sydney could barely muster voice to answer him.

'I will remember most, Mr. Hurst, that you taught me very much. That while you let me learn of you, I grew almost to forget some great troubles.'

'Troubles which may be nigh done with now,' he returned; 'for,' mechanically repeating the sentences he had drilled himself in, 'Jean tells me what she sees in store for you. If she is right, there is assuredly one cause for—for us—to be glad at this break up.'

Glad—was he? Best so a thousand times. And yet a momentary faintness surged over her. Outside Miss Hurst was heard. 'Here, Davis. This is the luggage. Be careful of it. We have no time to lose.' Sydney moved nearer Gilbert Hurst.

'Then I can only bid you—good-bye,' she said.

He leant against the chimney-piece; his usual fashion, as she first saw him at Wynstone. Her own hand she held forth in farewell. He knew it, but kept his arms fast folded. For honour, for reason, he must act the churl.

'Good-bye,' he repeated, motionless.

'Miss Grey!' cried his sister without; the door opened; a rush of flower-scented air filled the room; it closed; Sydney was gone.

She never remembered clearly that walk to Capel Moor station with Miss Hurst. Belle Babbington ran out from the Manor and claimed to join them. Davis brought a great bunch of white stocks as a valedictory offering from his 'missus;' Miss Jean kept up a stream of mysterious offers to write

anywhere or do anything for her benefit, and wafted salutes from the tips of her fingers as the train moved off: but all this, with the hot midday journey which ensued, seemed only like a dream, herself an automaton moving through it.

They were nearing Stillcote-Upton when she roused from this breathing space to pain once more. To pain, and to dim hope, struggling against readier unbelief in the dictum Gilbert Hurst long before, she later at St. Clairs, had learnt of their mutual master, Robert Vaughan.

But even that was fated to more conflict.

Her destination reached, she traversed sleepy little Stillcote guided by landmarks Jacob had pointed out last autumn. Past the lodgings of his clerkly days, where her father went to and fro each morning; down the quaint irregular High Street, where

shop folks stared at her, so evidently a stranger; by St. Clements, its rectory shadowed by the buttressed tower; by Stuarts, where guelder roses peeped at her from the old walled-in garden; and so towards Jacob's dwelling.

She looked up at his bow window, longing for the old man's smile; the only one in the world she could now count upon. He had not written back to her, but she never doubted his ready welcome. How much she would have to tell him; how much to withhold!

On Miss Ambler's shining knocker she sounded a summons, modest enough, but it set the echoes flying down the old town and brought in immediate response a small rosy-cheeked handmaid, with very red eyes.

'Mr. Cheene, Miss!' ejaculated Nancy, as, too tired to wait for invitation, Sydney

entered while asking for him, 'oh, didn't you know, Miss? Hadn't nobody sent you word of it? Why—' recklessly crumpling a clean apron over her face 'poor Mr. Cheene: he died o' Thursday, Miss, an' they've buried him on'y this very mornin'!'

CHAPTER XI.

CONTAINS SURPRISES.

Only those who, strength and spirit spent after many a fight, have dragged themselves for a little respite, a little tender healing to the one human source that never yet has failed them, and found that source cut off once and for all, only such can tell what Nancy's announcement signified to Sydney.

A great billow of despair seemed to close over her, an unconsciousness of everything save that another hard blow had come upon her when her forces were

at their lowest ebb, and none of her once full fund of buoyancy left to meet it.

Nancy's frightened cry to her mistress; Miss Ambler's scared appearance downstairs: these were a blank, emerging from which she found herself upon a slippery chintz-covered sofa, the black-robed landlady copiously sprinkling her with cold water, while the excited domestic fanned the air about into a temporary gale with the *Stillcote-Upton Weekly Express.*

'There, there,' said Miss Ambler, soothingly as Sydney's great sad eyes opened once more with sense and questioning. 'You are coming-to as nice as can be. Don't try to talk yet, miss. Nancy didn't ought to have told you all of a sudden. Shocks are bad; I have had them, and know. Here comes your luggage. You lay quiet, miss, while I take it in. We're ready for you, so to speak, for'—with a

sudden collapse into lachrymose condition, —'him that's gone, poor dear, had been counting of yonr coming, and the room at the back's been ready for you for weeks.'

The injunction to lie quiet Sydney obeyed involuntarily, for every vestige of power seemed to have left her. All the battles she had gone through from last year to this revenged themselves on her vitality at once. As white as marble and as still, she lay an hour and more without a word, till a glimpse of Miss Ambler creeping away a tip-toe with a countenance of profound anxiety supplied a spur to exertion which rarely found Sydney irresponsive.

'I am better,' she said, turning, with a most wistful attempt at a smile, to the mellow, late, afternoon light. 'Please don't be frightened for me. And—will you tell me—about it—now?'

Miss Ambler, more exercised than Sydney divined, had to cough and sniff a great deal before she was equal to meet this request; but presently, perched bolt upright on the edge of the chair, since the young lady made her sit, she managed to give account of as happy an exit from this troublous sphere as the best heart could desire its best friend.

'He talked a many times this month past of when Miss Grey—he called you Miss Grey'—Sydney made a movement of confirmation, the slightest colour rising, not unobserved—'of when you were coming for a holiday to him, and seemed as pleased about it as a prince. He'd not been well this winter, but he was always cheery the days he got your letters. He was looking for one this very time last week, and spoke put-out-like, for him, when I carried him up another instead. "But,"

said he to me when I fetched his breakfast-things down (for I waited on him myself, Miss Grey, and marked his appetite, and got him many a spring brocolow or new-laid egg my own self since I could afford it, for mean by nature I'm not, though close by habit I've had to be), "Miss Amelia," he says, "I'd no right to grumble at that letter. It's brought me great news. I shall tell you of it some day." And almost every time I came to his room he seemed to have been reading it, and I can't picture how he looked, miss, but more glad and young-like than I'd seen him these long whiles. He played a deal of music that day. Long pieces such as he learned forty years ago with his rich master, as was then. And at night, when I went to put his sitting-room lamp out, he'd just finished "Auld Lang Syne," the tune the clock at Stuarts used to play last thing before

he left, he's often told me. He was so fond of it. He said "Good-night," and went off sort of singing it. And he might have been listening to it when he was—sent for—Miss Grey. For in the morning, when Nancy couldn't wake him, I went and found him with a tear on his cheek and a smile on his mouth as easy-looking as a baby asleep. That was the morning your letter came, miss, which,' said Miss Ambler, after a gallant struggle with an obstinate sob, 'which you'll find in poor Mr. Cheene's rack upstairs, for, of course, you'll like his room to yourself while you stop here. Nothing would have pleased him more than for you to use it. And till the gentleman comes who knows what's to be done with the things, it's freely yours.'

Miss Ambler ended with a good hearty cry behind her handkerchief. Sydney had

not yet reached that merciful easement. But, stupefied as she still felt, the instinct born with her name did not desert her. This good landlady of Jacob's must not be encroached upon.

From her purse she took out three sovereigns.

'If I may stay here while these last,' she said, 'I cannot tell you how thankful I shall be. For,' moving her tired face into shadow again, 'I did so want this for a home, a little while.'

With a curious look Miss Ambler pocketed the gold, but if dissatisfied at the loose bargain, showed no signs of being so, for when the new lodger was fairly ensconced amongst the old lodger's household gods she was sedulous in her care, and made no trouble of anything except Sydney's poor patronage of the provision she offered.

But for days the oppression of mingled

pains kept Sydney in the bondage of an inertia which to her bright ready activity was as the thraldom of some heavy illness.

Jacob gone: no one to speak to: her every mental effort introspective: not a line from her mother, to whom she had written some ten days before leaving Wynstone: sharply assailed by mistrustful dread of her own doings—had her wilfulness been wickedness all through, and so had she thrust herself into her present punishment?—and above, beneath all emotions else, like the dirge of sea waves dominating every other sound upon the shore, one passion beat, beat, beating at her heart, restless as hopeless; small wonder was it that unuttered mourning darkened the dreary length of that fair Midsummer, threatening the very foundations of her much-taxed courage.

Not until July's first week had glided by did the tense strain of morbid suffering show signs of giving way. Then said Miss Ambler one morning:

'Miss Grey, if you go on getting paler and thinner, and eating no more than my tortoiseshell cat downstairs, it won't be long before you are laid up on my hands, and then I should like to know what's to be done!'

This sent a wholesome thrill of alarm through the girl. In such case, what indeed would be done? She was growing strangely selfish. Taking Miss Ambler's zealous services by far too easily. Unless she meant to throw her burden most unfairly on a stranger, she must rouse now at once.

The day was delicious. Martins chirped busily about the roof. The fresh air seemed to say, 'Come out and taste me,'

and Sydney's sense accepted the pure medicine. She must make a beginning of whatever her new course was to be. It should date from her old friend's grave. In the quiet little churchyard, which he had taken greatly to when he had 'Taffy's' tombstone placed there, Jacob Cheene was laid.

'How can I get to Lutterthorpe?' Sydney now asked. 'For I will try not to be ill, Miss Ambler. I ought to go out, I know; and I would rather go there than anywhere.'

It was not exactly the excursion Miss Ambler would have selected for her invalid; but, seeing it was almost the first wish Miss Grey had expressed, she wisely furthered it. Brief journeys by rail took Sydney to and fro between noon and evening. Between the lettered record of her earliest friend, the late turfed covering

of her last, she was granted the great relief of not altogether regretful tears. Here rested, after many cares, two faithful uncomplaining natures. Wherein was she more privileged than they, that she should waste her gift of life in vain repining? Nay, rather should she be up and doing, holding closer to that Presence of which the solemn age-worn walls uprising near seemed fitting sanctuary.

Tired completely, but more healthily, she spent that day's twilight among memory's less dangerous depths. Sitting in her father's chair, turning poor Jacob's cherished music pages over; registering those marked by her father's hand: and about her sleep that night hovered notes and chords of some long strain, unknown, but strangely sweet, such as aforetime had sounded often enough at Stuarts, unfinished when next morning she awoke.

Waking, work lay before her. She kept that fact written as it were in space, spurred to it by a new ambition. What she might earn need not be all her own. Though parted from Gilbert Hurst, her debt to him was not paid yet. However distant, she might gather together and send him, herself unsuspected, the means to preserve him from entire dependence on Mr. Montague Carle, or any other paymaster. That hope stirred animation once again. She would wait only a little longer, till the effort to breathe, to eat and drink were something less, then she would go straight to the trading-wharf of all nations, London, and backed by such credentials as Major Villiers could give her, would hunt for the hardest labour she could take at the highest pay.

One week more she would allow herself at Stillcote-Upton, if Miss Ambler would

have her, and when her landlady was retiring with her early dinner-tray, she asked if she might be harboured so long.

'And welcome!' was the emphatic answer. 'And I'd say for a month, Miss, if I could make sure this furniture would stand as it is so long. But an empty room you couldn't dwell in; and as for asking you to take share of mine——'

'Oh, I would not, indeed,' cried Sydney, shrinking from intrusion. 'If you think this will not be wanted for ten days more, I will be gone before it is dismantled.'

With that last word her voice quivered. It was difficult calmly to discuss these last relics of her father, dear old Jacob's treasures, being dispersed.

'Ah, I'll answer now,' said Miss Ambler. 'You'd like a little something out of here as a keepsake, like of poor Mr. Cheene, wouldn't you, miss? Now, if you'd

choose anything, I'd see it was bought for you if the things are sold.'

She had no storing-place for aught. Her very capital she would not count her own.

'It must be something small, indeed,' she said, looking round. 'This, if I could have it,' taking up a well-used leather writing-case, one from the office at Stuarts, Jacob had told her.

'Then that I'll get for you, miss,' promised the landlady, shaking the dust off the cover. 'Ah, deary me, he always wrote upon it. I saw him that very day——'

Sydney turned the much blotted pages over. A sheet with some three written lines slipped out. The words were to herself:—

'My Own Dear Miss Sydney,

'I told you

once pleasure never killed; but when I think I shall see you here so soon for your holiday, and then——'

That was all. Sydney folded the uncompleted message with reverent affection, thankfulness in her breast that no knowledge of her new troubles had dimmed the gladness of his last hours.

'Yes, the old case I shall like best,' she said, and Miss Ambler, delighted at securing her pale lodger's interest for anything, talked freely on of Jacob and his great kindliness, 'which nobody, Miss Grey, knew the value of better than myself, for many's the time hunger and me would have shook hands if it hadn't been for him, and that's a fact I'm not above confessing, and that's what I felt when I got a new black gown for him. I've paid the last respects to more than one friend, ah, and

relation too, in my black alpaca, but "no," said I, "for Mr. Cheene I'll have merino, and new. I'm not going to walk behind him in a half-worn skirt at tenpence a yard, especially considering there's no one else to follow," for I didn't know, miss, where you was, nor who—h'm—whether I ought to try and find you out.'

'Who will attend to everything here then?' Sydney asked. 'Had Jacob no relative, no one who understood such business?'

'Relative, no, miss. There were a many Cheenes once in Stillcote, but he has told me he was the last. As for business, I don't suppose he's left much to attend to; but a stranger, I think, will manage that little.'

'A stranger? He never told me of anyone.'

'No, miss. But there was one who came to him first last year. Later on

than this. He came in and out, and they did a deal of consulting like for a day or two, what about Mr. Cheene never said. Then he came again since this Easter. And Mr. Cheene must have expected him then, for he'd got a neighbour to step in, and by-and-by he called to me, "Miss Amelia," and I stepped up, and he had that very letter-case open and paper on, and he said, "I'm lawyer enough to have made my own will, and I want you to witness it." Which of course we both did, and Mr. Cheene locked it up in the cedar box that stands beside his bed, and said to me, "There now, it's ready for you to find," and to the strange gentleman, "and for you to act on," he said. So of course that gentleman will be his executor.'

'But should you not send this person word?' questioned Sydney, and was answered truly enough.

'When things come so sudden, miss, we are never ready for them! I had never so much as heard his name! But I've a notion that the letter which brought good news that morning came from him, for Mr. Cheene locked it up in the box with his will, and said to me—high-spirity like—"We're going to be gay with company soon, Miss Ambler." So I thought I'd wait the month out, and then if I'd seen nothing of anyone I'd just go down with the box and ask our clergyman if he'd open it, and find the gentleman's—— Why, goodness gracious sakes alive!' Miss Ambler broke off abruptly, startling Sydney, whose attention had been wandering, —'Here he does come up the street, and no mistake, and some one along with him! And,' peering out of the window, 'they're stopping at this door! Don't you mind, nor flurry yourself, miss. I'll tell him

about you, and say Mr. Cheene wouldn't have had you disturbed for the world. Perhaps,' hastily setting chairs at right angles, 'you'd like to go to your own room if they wish to come up here? I'll run and stop that stupid Nancy bringing them.'

But Miss Ambler was not quick enough. As she opened the door two people entered from the narrow landing. In an instant three were gazing at each other, all doubting the evidence of their own senses.

'Miss Alwyn!' exclaimed the male intruder; it was Richard Drayton.

'Sydney! Oh, my poor Sydney!' cried the lady beside him, running to catch the wonder-struck girl in her embrace. And the rest of that minute was chaos to them all.

The first to find voice was Miss Ambler.

Her wiry little curls were bobbing about, her eyelids ominously red, and her sniffs were frequent; but sentiment must wait its turn, now she must out with a long stifled say :—

'Miss Alwyn!' she repeated, fronting Sydney, still on Mary's shoulder. 'Yes, and Miss Alwyn I knew you to be these months past, though I wouldn't vex him that was here, by letting out what he didn't see fit to tell me! But when Bridget Lewis, that lived once at Stuarts still-room maid, and I taught hemstitching to when she was six years old, and has been to see me every time she set foot in Stillcote-Upton since, no matter what service she's been in, and knew all about my family's misfortunes with poor Mr. Alwyn, as well as I knew hers; when Bridget came two years back and told me she'd been with her mistress, Mr. Massey's

lady wife, and seen where Mrs. Alwyn had hid herself, and heard all about Mrs. Alwyn's daughter, that couldn't be made too much of, and Mr. Alwyn's that couldn't be made too little; and when she come again a-visiting last Michaelmas to Lady Wynne's, and brought word through a housekeeping friend in that Suffolk place, that the talk was Miss Alwyn had got into disgrace for something with her ma, and had gone away that summer: and when I measured that against a young lady I'd never seen before, coming here and crying in Mr. Cheene's room, and then all of us getting paid what Mr. Alwyn *ewe* directly after, why, you don't suppose I was going to be deceived any longer! Miss Alwyn, my dear, I've recollected you morning and night, from then till now, and if the prayer of a retired haberdashery old maid like me can fetch you prosperity,

you'll surely get it! While—' ended the grateful old soul, suddenly clapping three golden coins on the table, 'as for that money there! I'm glad to have found you with the birds' beaks-full you've taken, and if I touch a penny-piece for payment my name's not Amelia Ambler!'

With which she seized her neglected dinner-tray, and whipped out of the room, leaving the long-separated friends to an afternoon of strange, far-reaching explanations, starting with Mary's marriage, ending with something still more wonderful.

For Sydney, finding this fortnight-wed pair possessed the secret of her leaving St. Clairs, was now forced to tell where and with whom her past twelve months had been spent, and what had cast her loose from Wynstone, sending her to meet at Stillcote-Upton a loss she was so ill-prepared for.

'Jacob had made me feel his home was almost mine,' she said, faltering. 'When he went from me——'

'He had taken care it should be quite yours,' put in Mr Drayton. 'While he lived I was bound to give no hint of it to anyone—not even Mary; but now, as you will hear when I read you his will, he has left you everything he had in the world.'

'All my father's things!' cried Sydney. 'Oh, dear old Jacob! If you could hear me thank you!'

'Yes, Miss Alwyn; these, and other things that were your father's too.'

'He told me he bought nothing else but what—how did he put it?—what would have just gone to light a fire!'

'Ah, so they might then, but not now,' returned Richard Drayton, drily. 'You have never asked me yet, Miss Alwyn, how I came to be acquainted with your old

clerk, nor what first brought me to Still-cote-Upton.'

'I have heard so much; I am so glad to have you here,' answered Sydney, laying her head with a long-drawn sigh on Mary's knee, 'I think I scarcely want to know any more yet.'

'Just five minutes,' pressed Mr. Drayton, his wife giving him leave by a nod. 'Best clear all up at once, and get it over. So to go to first facts. I had a glimmering when I first met you of having heard your name, "Alwyn." After a bit I remembered when. It was on some visit of mine to a relative at Stillcote-Upton, who spent a night each week violin-playing, with some one so called——'

'My father!'

'As it turns out, yes. You and I never seemed strangers, did we, Miss Alwyn? That old network of intimacy must have

had something to do with it. Well, now for the next thing. You remember when I came to England it was to take up a little estate in the south. On that bit of property was a mine. The lease of it had been purchased of my uncle for fifty years. It had been closed sixteen. Was worthless, most folks said. I'd had some training in other mines, examined all I could of this, and thought differently. To see if I was right, I worked with all my money and all my time for fourteen months, for on the mine's value depended my chance of getting through with a scheme I think you understood.' Sydney smiled up at Mary. 'I found out that mine had been wrecked partly by incapable, partly by rascally management. Not the first time that sort of thing has happened. I saw my way clear as daylight to reconstructing a paying concern. I laid my plans accord-

ingly. Went to St. Clairs, to find you——'

'Me!'

'Yes, for it was the same Granfylde mine your father had got ruined in. His name headed the old list of shareholders. If you, as his representative, had held the original shares, your leave as largest proprietor was required to re-forming the business. Well, you were gone; no one knew where, nor could tell why. I was on my way to hunt up Mrs. Alwyn abroad, when I fell in with Major Villiers in town, and told him what I was after. He saved me a fruitless journey, by telling me those same shares had been offered at your father's sale, and amid shouts of laughter had been purchased by a clerk named Cheene. Him I foraged up forthwith. Showed him every single detail I had worked out, and to cut short a long business, which would only puzzle you at present,

got his consent and that of the other remaining shareholders, to start the company afresh on a safe footing, myself holding a certain amount of stock, and acting as manager. Success has followed so fast, that the shares have gone up without one check, and are still rising. I was able to tell Mr. Cheene when I saw him last May, that his few shillings'-worth of scrip, which he almost saved from the flames, represented now a very respectable fortune. It would bring in, if realized, five-and-twenty thousand pounds, to-morrow, Miss Alwyn.'

'So no more companions' places for you, foolish reckless child that you were,' said Mary, stooping fondly over Sydney's dark head, and to his wife's gentle care and caresses Mr. Drayton wisely left this new-made heiress awhile, almost mute in her great astonishment.

CHAPTER XII.

SYDNEY DRIVES A BARGAIN.

It was all true enough, incredible as the change seemed at first.

There were questions innumerable to ask that evening though; loose strands of the story to knit together; the homely words of Jacob's legacy to his dear master's child to read—the Draytons marvelling much over that grateful fidelity, whereof the source was and will always be known to Sydney alone. There was Mr. Vaughan's satisfaction to anticipate; and that retributive quest which tracked the unscrupulous pillager of the mine's funds

to his last bold stroke in Paris to be recounted; but one and all tended to the same issue.

Sydney was found; free, rich, and—happy?

About this Mary Drayton soon began to feel perplexed, not altogether satisfied. With wits quickened by her own new happiness, she was not slow at detecting a flaw in her friend's.

The Sydney regained was as dear and as trustful as the Sydney lost last year, and in twenty ways more beautiful, but she was not the same. Something was hidden under those smiles which vanished as soon as they flashed out; under that anxious attention which now and again forgot what was being talked of; and what that something was Mistress Mary set herself to discover, making before they parted for the night these notes:—

First—that Sydney lost not one syllable of what Richard Drayton had to say concerning Mr. Hurst, from schoolboy tales to the record of his manful bearing, when the doom of darkness was newly passed upon him.

Next—that she held her breath, distressed and pale, when he deplored the mischances which made such a man as Gilbert Hurst penniless, and vainly wished the old rector father had not in angry disgust let his luckless shares go to some speculator who now crowed over his bargain.

Then—that when he spoke of getting to Wynstone soon, Sydney's bosom rose and fell more quickly. She looked at neither of them, but her lips parted, curved with uncertainty, closed with determination; and her eyes darkened and brightened with concealed excitement.

From all of which observant Mrs. Drayton deduced certain ideas, and watched next day to have them confuted or confirmed.

They were with Sydney then by noon. Miss Ambler had tyranized over her, and not allowed her up much earlier. She met Mr. Drayton almost reproachfully.

'I thought you were going to Wynstone!'

'But not to-day. We have recollected ever so many more things to talk about, Miss Alwyn.'

'Before which, as you have not gone,' she said, with nervous gravity, 'I have one I want you both to listen to. For'—taking refuge in her father's chair, Mary beside her, Richard Drayton opposite—'after all, you see, this money you call mine, is not actually so.'

'Then whose is it?' exclaimed Mr. Cheene's executor.

'I mean,' she went on, 'some of it is due to some one else. It was my father's advice which made Mr. Hurst lose his four thousand pounds, was it not? So before I use any at all that must be given back, and, if you please, Mr. Drayton, you must give it directly.'

'I won't promise I would if I could,' was that gentleman's reply, 'fortunately I have not to decide. It can't be done. For, Miss Alwyn, your insatiable desire to give away all you have appears to have been understood by Mr. Cheene. You were too much in a maze yesterday to notice the wording of his will. Your shares in the Granfylde mine are not to be sold out till they touch a certain figure. I told him they would unquestionably reach it, and he showed his confidence in me by phrasing his legacy to that effect. Then the

sum, about what your father, if prosperous, would have left you, is to be funded for your life. Anything beyond that amount, you do what you choose with. But you could not possibly lay your hands on four thousand pounds yet to repay the Hursts. If you could, trusted as I have been by Mr. Cheene to guard you and your property, it would be my duty to try to dissuade you.'

'Which you might try,' Sydney blazed forth, vehemently, 'and you should not do it, Mr. Drayton! Oh,' dropping swiftly from this high flight into downright coaxing, 'Jacob meant it for the best, but he never would wish his money to make me sorrowful. Do, dear Mr. Drayton—Mary, ask him for me, he won't say "no" to *you* —do show me some way to give those thousands back to the Hursts. They were —very good to me!'

This petitioning, coupled with a glance at his wife, took effect.

'Perhaps it might be managed by degrees,' answered Mr. Drayton cautiously, 'if done at all. If Miss Hurst is willing—'

'She won't refuse it,' Sydney said, eagerly:

'—And her brother can be persuaded to accept it,' (no confirmation forthcoming on that point), 'so much might be returned them year by year. If you are bent on doing it.'

'I am. When can they have the first?'

'When you like; if Gilbert Hurst agrees.'

'Make him!' cried Sydney. 'You can do it. But one thing please don't tell them. That Miss Grey and Miss Alwyn are the same. I need be Miss Grey no longer; even my mother,'—pointing to a letter arrived that morning, 'gives me

leave to be myself. She has been ill, and so forgot, she says, to send your last note to me, Mary. She writes so sadly, calling us all so poor now that she cares nothing any longer for what name I work under! But to the Hursts let me be only Miss Grey still. Let them think if they take this back they take it from a stranger. It will save—me—pain, to have it so.'

Mary was distinctly shaking her head behind the speaker.

'I couldn't undertake that, I don't think it practicable,' her husband answered. 'It would surely get to them who you were. Best be above-board at once, Miss Alwyn.'

She looked at him with distress not to be explained.

'But you will make—them, take the money? Bind them to do it somehow!'

Mary's mouth formed a visible 'no.'

'I fear my urging would be of no use,'

responded Richard Drayton, a model of marital obedience. 'Mr. Hurst will treat the matter as I should, unless he is singularly changed. He will prefer any species of work to mulcting a generous woman in this way.'

'But oh, if he knew how refusal would hurt me!' she cried, leaning forward with hands clasped.

Mary made expressive signs at the supple, entreating figure.

'If you told him that yourself he might be induced to take your view of it,' conceded Mary's spouse, 'but *I* couldn't tie myself to persuade him.'

'Go with Richard and me to Wynstone,' suggested Mary, bending over the girl, 'then, you know, dear, you can put it in a business way, and settle it all perhaps in a few minutes.'

'The best way possible, unless you

prefer writing to Miss Hurst—Mrs. Babbington, whatever she is!' coincided Mr. Drayton.

Sydney changed colour. That arch-blunderer Miss Jean might so convey her offer that Mr. Hurst would infallibly reject it. The best, perhaps only chance of extorting his acceptance of it might lie in her urging it herself on some such pretext as had lured him into book-making. Drooping, for this pang she was courting, to meet, to leave him again, pierced her before time,

'Then I think I will go,' she said; and having chosen this course a feverish haste possessed her to start forth upon it. 'Shall you, shall we, start to-day?' she asked.

'To-day! Why, Sydney child, you need a week's nursing before you set out on that expedition!'

'I want no nursing. I am exceedingly

well, Mary;' this in hot haste: then sinking back wearily: 'And I can come here afterwards, you know. Miss Ambler will take care of me then.'

'Mary is wise. We should put Wynstone off for a few days, I think,' said Mr. Drayton.

'And let Mr. Babbington oust Miss Hurst's brother, and fling him into the pleasant toils of Mr. Montague Carles! And you call that being his friend!' cried Sydney, brimming over with indignation.

'Then suppose we say to-morrow,' yielded the gentleman; his commander-in-chief having telegraphed to that effect. And 'to-morrow,' soon after mid-day, they went.

From efforts at most charming cheerfulness—reward for their concession—Sydney subsided, as they neared Capel Moor, into

speechlessness, and, as they traversed the lane to Wynstone, now paced in front of her companions, now lagged behind in a mood decipherable only by one of her own sex. Mrs. Drayton's own pulse went a trifle faster from certain conjurings up of her usually placid imagination; but her fancies she loyally kept to herself—bride though she was.

'I'm afraid Miss Alwyn won't accomplish what she is come for,' said Mr. Drayton, as they passed the church: Sydney lingering by the gate.

'We shall see,' returned his oracle, and just then a trim west-country lass met them; looked at the unknown pair inquisitively, at Sydney with broad saluting smile and a curtsey.

'Miss Grey back, I do declare now! But they're not expecting of you, are they, Miss, 'cause mistress gave me half a day

to go to mother's. But, if you please, I'll run back again, and be ready to open the door before you get there; yes, indeed!'

'And so lose your holiday, Fanny!' said Sydney. 'No, you shall not do that. We are only—making a call.'

'But, Miss,' expostulated the maid, 'Rebecca's in the garden-piece picking strawberries. She'll never hear the bell, and for sure, she's that slow she'll take five minutes answering it. And strangers, too,' with a side curtsey at Miss Grey's friends. 'Let me run back, Miss.'

'They mind waiting no more than I do.' (Truly, Sydney was grateful for the respite. Like a coward, she was wishing herself a thousand miles away.) 'Shall we find all—both—at home?' That much she must know.

'Yes, Miss, as yet. But come Monday, they're a-going off. Mr. Hurst into Welsh

Wales, and,' smothering a chuckle, 'and mistress somewheres to a Mrs. Greaves, Mr. Babbington's sister's, to get married yon! The road's dusty a bit up, Miss Grey: won't you go in by the orchard?' volunteered Fanny, departing with another curtsey.

'Yes, that we will,' said Mary Drayton, covering Sydney's silence adroitly, with complaints of the heat, and taking the shadier way, they just contrived to escape seeing or being seen by Miss Hurst, who, with many assurances to her brother that she should not be half-an-hour absent, started at that precise minute from her own porch to the Manor House.

'Oh, the river, the river, and the hill!' cried Mary, enthusiastically, as the new un-Suffolk like scenes opened out. 'Sydney, you never made half enough of what you had to leave. It is a picture I could look at alone for hours.'

'Suppose you look at it for ten minutes with me instead,' laughed her husband, drawing her nearer (that couple have not discarded honeymoon habits to this day). 'I believe Miss Alwyn would find it easier to say what she intends to Hurst and his sister without us two sitting by listening. Then we would put in an appearance presently, and do our share of persuasion if necessary.'

For the fluttering as of some caged bird in her breast, a tightening uncontrollable in her throat, Sydney could only agree by a gesture, and passing—since it had to be done—quickly from the orchard by the garden front, so meant to reach the entrance of the house. But the study-window stood wide open, bunches of yellow roses—indistinguishable buds when she left—now wreathing it in a golden frame; and within her dear, deserted laboratory—

she held her hands tight over that crazy beating—within was Gilbert Hurst, alone. So lightly she had trodden the soft turfed lawn, he had not heard a single step fall.

The room disordered, littered with books piled anyhow in careless heaps (shame!) he half knelt, half leaned by the chair that had been always Sydney's. With sad, brown eyes turned all unseeing upon some object in his grasp, pale as the girl who, in the throes of hopeless love, gazed on him, he was speaking, ignorant of any human watch, deeming the walls of the empty house his only confidant.

Had she torn herself away she must have betrayed her presence by a sob. To hear his very own thoughts just once more was an offence the bitterness of a new, intenser regret must expiate. Bound to the spot, she looked; listened; and this is what she heard:

'Dearest! sweetest! But never mine! Darling, lost darling, why did you leave me? How could I let you go?' (She was blanched now as the tall lilies near). Then, with a hard, hard groan, 'Oh, man! Oh, madman that you are, be still and bear it! Think of her as your treasure, that won't hurt her. Keep her one gift,' he opened his hand; took out—she leant forwarder, forwarder, to make sure, with lips full reddening again, a blush like morning's dawn upon her face—a little, withered bunch of wild flowers she well knew, bound with a thread of silk, touching it with a caress as tender as mothers spend upon a sleeping babe; 'keep it, and let it teach you to thank God above, He took her from you—gave her to—some good Fate. So may it be, but—oh, it's torture!'

The strong frame was racked, bowed. Suffering, not well to be written of, forced

scalding drops from eyes denied the world's delights.

And how about that listener now? Throbbing, trembling, yearning; the etiquette of ceremonious entrance went to the winds. Her face all glorified with longing devotion, she drew back, crying to a lark that, springing from the meadow, went carolling up to the clear sky, 'Ah, then, little noisy one! You have not forgotten to sing since I went away, though all the other birds have turned so idle!' Then she waited ten seconds; took a great breath, and went to the study-window.

Gilbert Hurst had reached it with a stride, doubting his own ears. They stood now close together.

'Mr. Hurst, I have come back.'

'It *is* true.'

He thrust one hand within his waistcoat, the other he put to his forehead, wrestling

with a deadly weakness; then said, 'I thought it could be only you speaking. I am sorry my sister is not in; she will be home soon. Glad, of course, to see you. Has anything happened to make you return? Is there anything we can do for you?'

'Yes,' Sydney answered him, 'a great deal has happened. May I tell you? May I sit down?'

She was shaking too much to stand. He reached her own chair to her, but took his own old place by the littered bookshelves. 'I forgot to offer that,' he said, 'I beg your pardon.'

'Don't,' Sydney said, 'for I have come to do that of you, Mr. Hurst, and of Miss Jean. For I have been—deceiving you.'

'What!' he cried, 'you—deceiving us?'

'Only in one thing. I am Miss Grey, but that's not all my name. I am some one you saw—ah, many years ago: a child

then: and you promised not to hate me.'

'Why,' he exclaimed, 'you cannot mean that you are——'

'Yes, Sydney Alwyn. Child of him who Miss Jean says ruined your life. But you said you forgave him. How I have thanked you for it. I knew nothing of owing you anything when I came here. I could not pay you when I found it out, for all I had was gone. So I worked to do it till Miss Jean and you sent me away. But I never paid a tithe enough. Still I was trying, and—you do forgive me.'

He was profoundly moved, even to seeming forgetfulness of the pleader.

'Jean, Jean!' he said, 'to drive her to that slavery for me!'

'You will forgive me?' she begged on.

'Forgive? Why, what, Miss Alwyn?'

'My being who I am. Stopping in this shelter as I did.'

'Yes, I forgive both counts,' he said, slowly, 'if you must have the very words.' (Fondly she let her full glance rest on his worn, patient features. She knew now what her being there had cost him.) 'But surely you are not come back to say this only.'

'No. I want you to show you pardon me. I came this time to say that I am rich now. Such strange things have been happening. I have a friend who is yours too —Mr. Drayton. He will tell you how my father's money is returning to me. But I cannot use it till you say I may pay you—somehow—you and Miss Hurst, all that my father made you lose.'

He brought himself to his full height. 'That can never be, Miss Alwyn. Such debt is the creation of poor Jean's sentiment. Don't tempt her, don't ask me to stoop so

low as to load ourselves with your bounty under the poor pretence of justice.'

She knew he would refuse, though the alternative to his proffered liberation had to be Mr. Montague Carles! She triumphed in his words: proud of his pride. But she said:—

'Then all my money is to be valueless. I am to enjoy none of it, because you will not have this little.'

He felt her merciless, this rich young woman. It was getting more than he could stand.

'Our taking it,' he answered, huskily, 'could make no real difference to your happiness, Miss Alwyn. It would destroy all chance of mine. Will you let that have some small weight with you? Spend your wealth with—him who will soon claim you. Forget, though I shall not,

that you ever made this generous offer.'

She hung her head.

'No one will claim me,' she said, with a wondrous soft distinctness, 'I—suppose. It—that was all a mistake of Miss Jean's.'

At this an ungovernable exclamation escaped him. He started violently. Out from their hiding-place dropped the withered flowers.

Sydney had them in an instant.

'You have only let fall some worthless rosebuds, Mr. Hurst. I will fling them away.'

'They are mine, Miss Alwyn. Give them to me,' with hand extended in desperate earnest for his treasure.

'Let me gather you fresh ones.'

'No, no; those, if you please. I must have them.'

'You shall not,' she said, 'till you promise to take that money.'

'Then rob me, if you choose,' he cried, worked into all but frenzy by passionate pain, 'but I will NOT rob you!'

'You need not rob me at all,' she said, just loud enough for him to hear, 'Take—me—too.'

There was a long minute's pause. Gilbert Hurst shrank back, then stood at bay. Sydney stole to him as only a true woman would have dared. He felt her following, put his hand out as to repel her. She took it, clasped it softly in her own.

'I did something else, the most wicked of all,' she whispered, 'but I am not sorry for that. I was by the window a little while before I spoke. I saw you—I heard you.'

He gave a sigh that was grievous.

'And would marry me—God forbid—for pity!'

'No, Gilbert,' she said, with a splendid boldness that bade his soul be comforted, 'for love! Only for love!'

And when his arms were about her, his heart to hers, her sweet kiss answering his, he believed at last, with such a deep rejoicing as made the hour sacred to both for ever.

CHAPTER XIII.

'SHAKE HANDS ALL ROUND, GOOD FRIENDS.'

THE whole business was a very bitter pill to Mrs. Alwyn, restoring as it did her younger daughter to the precise position she herself had abdicated with such ill grace and in such singular ill-odour.

But that last lamentable *fiasco* with Leonora had thrown her into very real illness. Sydney, hurrying to Paris, had nursed her mother with self-denial scarcely appreciated—for did she not know someone the other side the Channel counted every day a week till she was by him?

—and common recognition of the tender zeal she might have died for lack of left to poor Leonora only, tied Mrs. Alwyn's tongue on subjects impossible to be agreed upon by her and her attendant.

'I presume any attempt on my part to dissuade you from throwing yourself away as you propose doing would be useless, Sydney?' was her nearest approach to argument on this topic.

'Perfectly useless, mamma,' Sydney answered gently; and Mrs. Alwyn, weak and disarmed at this stage of her convalescence, bowed to the inevitable, though in after time and better health she was not sparing of hints among her acquaintances that her life had been greatly hampered, her income (by some mysterious reckoning of her own) much narrowed by the doings of a daughter who, 'with some admirable points, never knew what it was to submit

to a mother, never could bear to be guided!' and on that score she secured a good deal of sympathy from a new circle of intimates.

Her one parent being unequal to the exertion of superintending a wedding, Sydney was married in early autumn from the Draytons', the Dacies coming down to Granfylde for the double pleasure of the event and a delighted inspection of their daughter's new domain. And there, self-elected groomsmen, came Sydney's old fellow-scholars, charmed with all brought about by these late changes, especially their new watches (not silver!), and there came the rector of St. Clairs, sharing keenly the joy of these two people to whom he had been ever drawn as kinsfolk in spirit though not in blood, and from whose union he went back to his parish acknowledging, as he does at every parting

from them since, that He who directs men's lives planned well their separate sorrows, which now are merged in mutual happiness so full and true.

The Babbingtons being in full possession of Wynstone—where, however, 'ample room, Horatius says,' was at the disposal of Mrs. Babbington's brother till September—Gilbert Hurst and his wife, unfettered by house or establishment, went further and further south till they wintered on another continent, and there saw the seasons round before returning to England.

During their absence, Mrs. Alwyn took up residence in a tiny London house on the skirts of a fashionable square, and with perseverance worthy of a better cause began sweeping the matrimonial seas once more for Leonora's behoof.

The labour was shortened unexpectedly.

Mr. Rupert Villiers came dutifully to pay his respects to his aunt, his compliments to his cousin. About Leonora's broken engagement the Major had withheld all particulars. He was not the man to gossip even with his son over a woman's disappointment. The ladies soon found to their relief that nothing of the pseudo Mr. Morecoombe-Wood's history was known to anyone likely to retail it.

'The man was unworthy of my Leonora! never name him to me! Only help her to forget him!' Mrs. Alwyn begged, and Mr. Rupert obeyed very literally.

He found the cultivation of cynicism slow for a lengthened period. Mrs. Alwyn's 'straitened means' (she kept Sydney's hundreds strictly to herself) were not contemptible, taken in conjunction with a stock of valuable furniture. What was hers was Leonora's. Leonora was hand-

some still, especially by candle-light. Presently the young lady took to wearing a certain sapphire ring given her on a very memorable occasion. Upon that hint Mr. Villiers spake, with the result that before another season began he was inducted as ostensible master of 'Number twenty-three, Gladys Crescent.'

They suit in their new positions excellently. After his and her own self, each one admires the other to the end of conceit's demands. But they never trouble each other with too much of confidences; so when one day Mr. Villiers read aloud from his paper the tragic end in a San Francisco gambling saloon, of a gambler of European reputation, whose description he well recognised, he felt under no necessity to confess that he had had many dealings with this questionable character, nor did he dream that the rascal put an

end to by a Californian knife, was at one time near standing in the marital shoes he now wore so easily.

Major Villiers took his son's settlement with moderate satisfaction.

'It wasn't the one I wanted, more's the pity for you, Rupert,' he said, and, though fairly reconciled to life and his lot, Mr. Rupert once allowed himself to echo that regret.

It was at a big gathering the year after he had married, to which, after much toadying of a society magnate, he had got himself and Leonora invited, and where, among a throng of name and rank they had found themselves nobodies. A good-tempered fellow, seeing him forlorn (it was Tufter, by the way) spent five minutes in pointing out the notabilities of the evening, among them:

'That tall fellow with the brown beard.

He's blind, though you'd never guess it. He's written a book on Upper Egypt that's all the rage among the blues just now. Some association got him up to lecture this afternoon, and my lord president nabbed him for to-night. That dark-eyed woman everyone is looking at against him is his wife. Eh? do you see her, Villiers?'

Villiers did see her as she stood, one hand on the arm of her companion, who talked to a group of celebrities. Soon he was elbowing his way towards her.

'Mrs. Hurst,' he said, accosting her with an air of delicate melancholy, 'this is an unexpected tri—pleasure. How little I guessed I was to meet you to-night.'

'We stayed unexpectedly,' she answered, a momentary shyness, for she remembered their last interview, enhancing all her charms.

'Is it too late?' he said, in a lowered

key, 'or may I dare to ask if you hold me excused for—two years ago?'

Now she was self-possessed again; looked through him, down upon him, from the royalty of her beautiful young matronhood.

'I hold you fully excused,' she said, 'and am myself immeasurably grateful to you.'

She turned to her husband with the perfection of contentment. Mr. Villiers, very sorry indeed for himself, went and found Leonora in a remote corner, told her, morosely, she had powdered too freely, and took her off home without vouchsafing the information that her step-sister was one of the brightest stars in the brilliant throng they were leaving.

But the Hursts are rarely in London, though preferment of society and science is ready enough for them there if they cared to take it. 'Stuarts' was in the

market when they came back to England, and now, cleared to the last payable farthing of the debt poor John Alwyn died under, 'Stuarts' is their home.

There old friends and new come about them, Major Villiers often, the Comynghams once, Miss Ambler when she wills. Thence go forth other works by Gilbert Hurst and that co-labourer whom only few know of, which earn him wide publicity and praise and bring in revenue which now he little needs.

For under Richard Drayton's prudent management Granfylde sends a steady stream of riches on them, and Sydney declares if she had not Gilbert to tell her what channels to turn it into she should be perplexed out of all enjoyment of this troublesome, ever-expanding wealth.

Troublesome indeed! Why, what is it Mrs. Gilbert Hurst likes better?

This.

She came silently the other day upon her husband and their five-year-old daughter in deep conclave under one of the bee-haunted blossoming limes in their garden. The sun shone through the leaves. The sky above was intensely blue. To life's beginner the world looked very fair. Said the little one, finishing a thought aloud:—

'But it doesn't matter for that.'

'And what does not matter for what, sweetheart?' her father asked.

'Your being blind, father; for just the things that are pretty. But oh, I do wish you were not blind for something else!'

'What is it?'

'To see mother. She is such a beautiful mother.'

Gilbert stretched his arm over the grass and gathered the child to him.

'I know that, little one, without any

seeing. And shall I tell you something more wonderful? That dear mother of yours grows more and more beautiful to me every single day of our lives!'

'Flatterers!' she said, happy tears in her eyes, her hand on her child's brown hair, her head on her husband's shoulder.

And there was Sydney Hurst's best cherished wealth!

THE END.

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